FOLLY'S GOLD

LEROY SCOTT

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FOLLY'S GOLD

By Leroy Scott

In 'Mary Regan,' Leroy Scott created a fascinating character — a girl of the criminal aristocracy whose adventures made a graphic story of the night life in New York. In 'Folly's Gold' her amazing career is carried through a book of even more thrilling adventure. Clifford, a young detective, who had married her, only to have her leave him a few hours after, meets her again as an accomplice of Brady, an unscrupulous ex-chief of New York detectives, who is conducting a huge blackmail game. From this strange triangular situation of Clifford, Brady, and Mary Regan, Leroy Scott has created a powerful story of the New York underworld.

Folly's Gold

LEROY SCOTT

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CHILDREN OF THE WHIRLWIND
A DAUGHTER OF TWO WORLDS
MARY REGAN
NO. 13 WASHINGTON SQUARE
CORDELIA THE MAGNIFICENT
PARTNERS OF THE NIGHT
COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE
TO HIM THAT HATH
THE SHEARS OF DESTINY
THE WALKING DELEGATE

FOLLY'S GOLD

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BY

LEROY SCOTT

Author of 'Mary Regan,' 'The Heart of Katie O'Doone,' 'The Trail of Glory,' etc.

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1926

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The Riverside Press

CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

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CHAPTER I

WHEN OLD FOES GET TOGETHER

CLIFFORD had been rather bored by the self-pitying story told by the frenzied Mrs. Fownes — bored despite the facts that she was young, rich, a famous beauty, and a dashing figure in the younger social set of Long Island, with a jealous husband of proud family. The story she had told him, in its chief elements, was as old as woman's folly: a wife's letters of mad affection to a man not her husband; the theft of the letters; the demand of a large sum, under threat of exposure, for their return to their writer. Mechanically Clifford had taken in all the details of this latest version of the ancient tale, his mind all the while commenting upon this seemingly incurable and uncontrollable impulse of mortals to commit their mad and illicit infatuations to paper.

That is, Clifford had been bored and his mind had been mechanical until the frantic and now repentant Mrs. Fownes had said:

'I went first with my trouble to Mr. Bradley, he being a neighbor. But Mr. Bradley hasn't been able to help me yet — and I simply must have help! — quick help! — and so I've come to you, for friends have told me what a wonderful detective you are. Though, of course, I'll not tell Mr. Bradley about you, for that might make him lose interest.'

At Bradley's name all of Clifford's faculties had become electrically alive. Bradley! That name had changed this old and commonplace story to a story of first importance. No longer was it primarily the case of this pretty, feather-brained philanderer. To Clifford in an instant the case had become primarily the case of Bradley.

Clifford knew very much of Bradley's recent professional doings, but, as a very natural result of a year that he had spent in the capitals of Europe running down the Stanthorp affair, Clifford was naturally still ignorant upon many details of the spectacular metamorphosis in Bradley's personal life. Therefore, this August afternoon, as he rode out to Green Manors, the smart and exclusive Long Island summer colony where Bradley had bought a handsome country establishment, and where Mrs. Fownes also lived, Clifford started in to quiz Jerry Nordstrom, whose week-end guest he was to be. But the keen Jerry left his first question unanswered.

'I suppose this means you're getting ready for another go at Bradley,' Jerry chuckled, looking at the lean, bronzed face of his friend — lined, though still only in his mid-thirties — whom he and others had considered quixotic for giving up the chance of a brilliant legal career to start life in the Police Department as an ordinary patrolman. 'Tell me, old son, what was really behind all that fighting between you and Bradley when you were both in the Detective Bureau? Was it because Bradley was instinctively against you for being a college man?'

'It was because Bradley, as Chief of Detectives, was the smoothest of all police crooks, and wanted me to string along with him in the same game. When I refused to collaborate, and started in to show him

up — that's where the entire trouble started between us. And since the time we both went into private detective work I've still been trying to show him up. There's our little trouble.'

Clifford knew he was not telling the whole truth. There was also the bitter matter of Mary Regan, for whom both he and Bradley had fought. He quickly returned to the question Jerry had left unanswered.

'Just how does Green Manors take to a former Chief of Detectives, Jerry, who barely escaped being sent to Sing Sing?'

'You've got to give Bradley a very large bouquet, Bob. He's certainly handled things around Green Manors with a wise head. Everybody in the place is curious about him. Many are now strong for taking him in as one of ourselves.'

'For a man like Bradley to break into a place like Green Manors and set himself up as a country gentleman — that was certainly some stunt! How did he manage it?'

'He bought his home in Green Manors through a dummy, so there was no chance for us to block his coming out there even had we wanted to. At first we expected the usual thing — that he'd try to butt into society, the different clubs, and all that. But that's exactly what Bradley didn't do. He ignored Green Manors as though we didn't exist. Then, since he was on the scene, he stepped in as an efficient neighbor and helped the Randolphs out of the usual sort of a nasty mess their moron of a son had got into with a show girl. The Randolphs tried to pay Bradley. Bradley was insulted at the offer of payment for a neighborly act. Then the Randolphs thought they'd pay him by inviting him to one of their second-rate dinners. Bradley refused, with as much stiff formality as a king ever

needs. Since then there have been many other invitations — and to first-class parties. Bradley's refused them all. And now every one looks up to him.'

'Bradley could not have pursued a more clever policy,' Clifford commented. 'But his police record — his trial — how do the people take that? How has he explained all that away?'

'Bradley hasn't tried to explain anything. He merely let fall the remark that there never had been a good police official who has not had enemies, and been subject to calumny, even arrest.'

'But at his last trial Bradley escaped conviction on a technicality!' This outcome of the trial still rankled with Clifford, for he had worked up the evidence that had brought the once all-powerful ex-Chief of Detectives into court.

'Yes, but that was a year or two ago. Most people soon forget, and many never even knew. Whatever the facts may have been, Green Manors now regards Bradley as a big interesting figure who is the uncomplaining victim of unjust persecution.'

'So you people fall for that!' exclaimed Clifford, with a bitter thought upon how very difficult, how nearly impossible, it is to convict a crooked police official who has keen wits and influence with politicians. 'But where does Green Manors think Bradley's money for his big establishment comes from?'

'He has saved, and has speculated successfully on tips given by Wall Street friends. So Bradley has said. His chief business interest just now is stock speculation. Of course he still has his detective agency, but people at Green Manors consider the agency to be only a side issue with him.'

'You say Bradley never goes out socially. Doesn't he have any social life at all at Green Manors?'

'Plenty. But all at his own place. He always has a week-end party, and sometimes a party on during the week.'

'What sort are his guests?'

'Pretty high class. Big actors and actresses, and men and women who belong rather high up in New York society. Of course he asks no one from Green Manors, except a few unmarried men. And his parties are mighty proper, too. Nothing of the jazz and wild-woman stuff such as is pulled off at some of the shindigs at the smartest places out here.'

This fitted in with some other facts Clifford had gathered and with some conclusions he was reaching.

'By the by, speaking of parties,' Jerry went on apologetically, 'I hope you'll excuse me, Bob — but before I knew you were coming out I'd accepted an invitation to a dance at Bradley's for to-morrow night. I'll merely make my appearance at his house for my promise's sake, and then duck right back to home and you.'

'Don't bother, Jerry. I'll be all right.'

In fact Clifford was glad of the chance that solitude would give him to make certain investigations concerning Bradley, and incidentally concerning Mrs. Fownes. Bradley, the one-time crude, unpolished, domineering, but quick-witted Chief of Detectives, now a more-or-less polished gentleman, respected in, and piquing curiosity in, such a community as Green Manors — there was indeed a transformation for you! Just what was behind it? He had his own idea.

Clifford lapsed into silence, thinking of his old-time enemy who had so often escaped him. And this thinking of Bradley caused his thoughts to swing inevitably to Mary Regan. She was a bitter memory, Mary Regan; cause of many of those too-early lines of suffer-

ing in his face. His mind once more went over the climax of his experiences with her, with their still mystifying conclusion. But by sheer effort of will, Clifford forced his mind away from her. He had to try to forget, and keep on trying.

The train slowed down at the ivy-covered brick station at Green Manors. In the great arc of freshly raked blue-stone waited scores of automobiles, come for commuting husbands and week-end guests. As Clifford stepped down upon the platform, the first person his eyes settled upon was Bradley. Bradley was welcoming some half-dozen smartly dressed men and women and escorting them to two big cars. Clifford watched Bradley at this business of being host. He had to admit that Bradley was doing it extremely well.

As Jerry's car swung to the platform, Bradley saw Clifford. Without a moment's hesitation, hat in hand, he walked toward them. Clifford rapidly scrutinized the well-known figure: the same square shoulders — the same deep chest — the same square, forceful face, with shining black hair scarcely lined with gray despite his forty years — the body lighter in weight than in other days; well-tailored and with the manner of knowing how to wear his well-tailored clothes. Altogether a more subdued and restrained Bradley than the Bradley of their earlier conflicts. But, unless Clifford's guess was all wrong, here was a Bradley even more resourceful and dangerous than the Bradley of other days.

'How are you, Mr. Nordstrom,' Bradley said. Then he turned to Clifford. His dark eyes were direct, but expressed nothing. 'Hullo, Clifford. Been a long time since we met. Out here at Green Manors for some time?'

'Just staying over the week-end with Mr. Nordstrom.'

'What I thought when I saw you with him. There's going to be a little party over at my place to-morrow night. Clifford, I wish you'd come along with Mr. Nordstrom.'

Bradley's voice was almost cordial, but Clifford recognized the invitation as a challenge. Clifford hesitated a moment. To see what he could of Bradley's place, his environment, to learn of Bradley's standing in Green Manors — this was Clifford's purpose in coming here. But to see the inside of his house, to meet Bradley's friends — this was more than he had expected.

'Thanks, Bradley. I'll be glad to come.'

Bradley waved a genial hand and went back to his guests. Clifford had to admit this to himself, that Bradley had always had cool nerve.

The dance the next night at Bradley's house exactly fitted Jerry Nordstrom's description of Bradley's parties. Clifford knew by reputation most of the guests. Each had had some private trouble in his or her life; but not one of them would have been out of place in the smartest home in Green Manors. The women guests were all week-end visitors in the colony; of the men, perhaps four or five of the younger ones were residents. The music was by one of New York's best-known jazz orchestras. There was plenty to drink and it was of excellent quality, but throughout the entire evening Clifford did not see the slightest evidence of over-indulgence. Many dances were going on that night in the great houses of gay Green Manors; but Clifford felt certain that at none of them were the outer proprieties more strictly observed.

The big living-rooms of the first floor, Clifford

noted, were furnished with excellent, if not distinguished, taste; taste that Bradley had paid for, just as he had paid for his furnishings. There was a most efficient butler, and under him most efficient servants. The place, and its atmosphere, was a perfect background — for certain imaginable purposes.

Toward ten o'clock Clifford had a mild surprise. This was occasioned by the arrival of young Mrs. Fownes and her husband. Mrs. Fownes was in the highest of spirits, but Clifford surmised that this gayety was assumed to hide an inner fever. Later he found he had guessed right; for after dancing half a dance with her, she declared herself dizzy and in need of a breath of fresh air. In the solitude of a corner of the great porch, she whispered with an almost entire loss of control:

'Mr. Clifford — those threats are getting worse and worse. Fifty thousand they want! I can't possibly raise more than twenty — without asking my husband, and he'd demand to know why I wanted so much money all in one sum. Oh, it's terrible! You — you think you may get the letters back for me?'

'There's a chance — yes.'

'You have what you detectives call a clue?'

'I'll say this much — I think I know who is behind this whole matter!'

'Oh, thank God!' she breathed. 'You think you'll really be able to make them give the letters up?'

'I can't answer that. Thinking a thing, and proving it, are very different matters. If it's the same to you, let's not discuss the affair here. Shall we go in?'

Presently Mrs. Fownes was dancing with Jerry Nordstrom; and Clifford, standing aside, was thoughtfully studying Bradley's guests — thinking over the puzzle of how people of such undoubted quality came to be here — when an arm slipped through his.

'I'm not dancing this particular dance, Clifford,' said Bradley quietly. 'What do you say to a smoke in my study and a quiet chat about old times?'

Alive with curiosity Clifford followed his host through the library, and thence into a room which, though much smaller, was at least fifteen by twenty feet. In it was a desk with two telephones on it, and a row of pearl-topped push-buttons; and beside the desk was a typewriter on a small table. For the rest the room was comfortably furnished; at its farther end, Clifford noted, was a French window, slightly ajar, which undoubtedly opened upon a balcony.

'This is my home workshop,' Bradley explained casually, offering his cigar-case from which Clifford helped himself. They lighted their cigars and sat down. Silence fell between the two, and they regarded each other steadily, Clifford trying to think why Bradley had asked him to this remote room and alert for any hostile move.

Bradley was the first to speak. His voice was drawling, bland.

'Clifford, what do you say to a little game of stud poker?'

'I don't just get you, Bradley.'

'We're sitting in a game against each other,' the bland voice went on. 'I was just suggesting that we show each other all our cards, except our hole-card — or hole-cards, if we prefer to keep a second or third card face down. In other words, that we tell each other all the more or less unimportant things we know, which we'd each find out anyhow.'

Certainly an audacious proposition, thought Clifford. But very much like Bradley.

'I'll play first,' continued Bradley. 'Here are some of my cards, all face up. The instant I saw you at the

station yesterday, I knew you were out here to look me over and learn all you could about me. I thought I'd make it easy for you. That's why I invited you to come to my party and get all your dope at first-hand. You see, I didn't want you to make any mistakes.'

Clifford made no response. Hard as he had fought Bradley, he had always had a streak of admiration for the cool, audacious boldness of the man.

'Though you fell down the last time you tried to get me, Clifford, and though you've been out of the country for a year, you still haven't given up your idea that some day you can land me, and you've already started out on that job. Right, Clifford?'

Clifford nodded.

'Nothing like being frank. I guess I've shown you everything I hold — except my card in the hole. It's your play, Clifford.'

There was challenge in Bradley's voice, and Clifford accepted it.

'You know, of course,' said Clifford with the grim directness of certainty, 'that I know that you are to-day the biggest and cleverest crook in the United States.'

'Thanks at least, Clifford, for the compliment of putting me at the head of the class.'

'Here's what I've found out about you, Bradley, and I'll admit that you've been clever. When you had to get out of the Police Department, for a long time you were sore at all the world. Then in your bitterness you had your great idea. You had always been a crook, but a comparatively small crook. You were now going to become the greatest of all crooks. That was your first great idea. You saw that no crook before ever had an equipment equal to yours. On the one hand, you'd been almost twenty years in the

Police Department; you knew exactly how the police work, every device by which they catch criminals, and you therefore knew how to avoid the police's traps; also you had friends in the department who would give you warning and help you out. On the other hand, you had handled most of the big criminals of the country. You knew their methods, you knew them personally; you could pick the cleverest of them, the big specialists, to help out in any job you wished to pull off. As I said, a wonderful equipment!'

Bradley's face did not change. 'Thanks again for the high praise — such as it is. Anything else, Clifford?'

'Yes. Then you had your second big idea. To do the big things you dreamed of doing you needed the right kind of "front." Your detective agency wasn't sufficient. So you decided also to become a gentleman — a country gentleman. You had plenty of money saved over from the rich pickings of the years when you were Chief of Detectives — and when you had been my boss. So you started in to make a good job of it. You started in to build up your personality. You worked regularly with a physical culturist; and also with a dancing teacher — even though you now say you don't dance. I'll admit you've worked hard. Outwardly you've almost made yourself over. You hired a valet who knew what was what; he's done his best for you. You went to the best tailors and men's outfitters, and also they've done their best. When you bought this place at Green Manors, you got people to run it for you who knew their business, and you were clever enough to make Green Manors believe you didn't care for their society. You've built up a wonderful front! You doubtless make some legitimate money from your detective agency, and you may make a little

from your speculations. But the money you make, the tricks you pull off, behind this front — that's what counts!'

'Most interesting, Clifford — most interesting! Anything more?'

'Yes! Then came your third great idea, Bradley. You discovered the richest field for roguery in the world and you decided to become a specialist in that field. In no other city is so much money recklessly spent as in New York. Here is where the rich of the country come to have their fling, this is the City of Folly — and since the country's tone of respectability must be maintained, these follies must be kept secret. The follies of our gay world — what a gold mine to the person who has the secret of those follies! And never before, Bradley — never! — was there a man with such a knowledge of this city's secrets as you possess! Just apply the pressure of intimated exposure, and the gold pours forth! All the roguery in the world never discovered a richer gold mine. There's your third big idea, Bradley; you have become just this kind of a gold-miner, and the name of your mine is "Folly's Gold"!'

'Go on, Clifford,' drawled Bradley. 'Won't you be specific and tell me just what piece of folly I am now trying to mint into my magic gold?'

'That's for me to find out, Bradley — if I can.'

Clifford did not see fit to say that he believed that the stolen letters of Mrs. Fownes, the attempt to frighten her into paying fifty thousand dollars for their return, was one of the many enterprises Bradley had under way to extract gold from human folly.

There was mockery and challenge in Bradley's voice when he next spoke. 'A most interesting and comprehensive bit of speculation, Clifford. We'll see how

much of it your later endeavors can prove to be fact.'

This time Bradley laughed aloud, but very softly. There could not have been more of cool defiance and cool challenge in his voice and bearing.

CHAPTER II

A LOST ROMANCE

CLIFFORD made no response to Bradley's soft-laughed defiance. Bradley held his brilliant eyes steadily upon his guest-enemy. Between the men there was a silence of several moments. Then abruptly Bradley asked:

'Seen Mary Regan lately?'

Clifford could not repress a start. 'No.'

Bradley did not pursue the subject he had interpolated. He went back to Clifford's analysis of himself.

'A most interesting theory you have about me, Clifford. You may run across some surprises — and perhaps soon — who knows? Shall we rejoin the rest of the party?'

Clifford followed his host back to the great living-room where the dancers were swirling about. As he passed through the doorway, he suddenly halted, utterly dazed. Before him, darkly beautiful in a gown of apple-green velvet, her white back to him, was Mary Regan. He had not seen her since that afternoon which seemed ages and ages ago.

'Mary —' he breathed involuntarily — 'Mary!'

She turned, went pale, and supported herself by catching the back of a chair. But at once she had regained that composure which he had always thought so remarkable in her. She bowed ever so slightly.

'Mr. Clifford,' she said.

Bradley was eyeing him sardonically. 'I mentioned, Clifford, that there might be a few surprises. This is the beginning of one of them.'

Clifford hardly heard him. He had regained a measure of his own self-control. He spoke with extreme formality:

'May I have the pleasure of this dance, Miss Regan?'

'If you wish,' she said coldly.

He slipped an arm about her and they glided out upon the floor. In that moment Bradley and the case of the feverishly vivacious Mrs. Fownes were entirely forgotten.

Twice he swung around the room, dazed into the silence of whirling thoughts and questions by this unexpected meeting, by the feel of Mary's lithe body again in his arms. But at the entrance to the library swift decision took shape out of his inner chaos, and he said with quiet authority:

'I wish to speak with you for a minute.'

He led her, unresisting, into the quiet study he and Bradley had just left. There he paused and faced her.

'I wish you to know that I did not seek this meeting to-night,' he said. 'I have fulfilled your two requests, have I not?'

'You have,' she answered.

They said no more for the moment, but stood regarding each other fixedly. Clifford had always thought her beautiful, but never more beautiful than now; with her dusky, proud face, her lithe grace which proclaimed itself even when she stood in such rigid erectness, her composure which was so perfect that it had often seemed to him almost an announcement of her superiority to all the world. And suddenly Clifford realized that despite all his efforts to forget, despite all that had happened, he still loved her.

Automatically, during this silence, his mind raced tumultuously back, touching the high spots of his

strange experience with her. . . . Though she looked the equal of the richest and best-bred daughter in Green Manors, she was the daughter of that one-time world-famous master confidence-man 'Gentleman Jim' Regan, dead these many years; and had passed her girlhood in the cynical little court that had always surrounded her father, and had absorbed its cynical philosophy. Grown into young womanhood, she had made her first attempt to put her cynical philosophy into practice, and this had brought her life into contact with Clifford's. From the first Clifford had believed that her point of view was merely a mental habit created by association, and was not an expression of her true self; and he had proceeded upon the belief that, instead of making arrests, he would be doing a bigger thing if he could awaken in her this real Mary Regan. What conflicts there had been! And at last he had thought that he had won! And at last —

His voice came from him huskily: 'Can you tell me now your real reason for leaving me as you did?'

'My letter told you everything there was to tell you.'

'Your letter!' In swift agony he lived again the events of the far-gone days of that letter: their private marriage in a remote up-State town; their motor trip back to his apartment, with his hope of their beginning a great life together; the message waiting which had called him immediately out for a pressing conference; his return an hour later, his finding of her hastily written letter.

'Your letter!' he repeated. From within his coat he drew a bill-fold, and from it he took a bit of paper which he unfolded. 'Here is your letter. Do you think it explanation enough?'

Slowly he read her words aloud to her.

'"Being alone has given me a chance to think things

over. I am convinced that, with our different angles of looking on life, our marriage was a mistake. Therefore I am leaving. I ask two great favors, and hope you will grant them. First, do not try to find me and do not try to have my movements watched. Second, keep our marriage secret, if that is possible."'

Clifford refolded the note, returned it to its place, and was about to go on, when she checked him with:

'If we are to speak further of personal things, I'd prefer doing it where there is less chance of our being disturbed. There is that little balcony.'

With him following, she stepped through the outward-opening French windows, which she almost closed behind them. Light enough flowed out into this silent retreat for him clearly to see her face.

'And now what is it?' she asked.

'I have scrupulously observed the two requests of your letter,' he said. 'But considering the way you left me, don't you think I should have a little fuller explanation? And couldn't we at least have talked the thing over before you left?'

'My letter told all there was to be told,' returned her even voice.

'If you regretted the marriage, I would at the time have arranged to give you a divorce. And if you wish, I will now arrange so that you can get a divorce.'

'Starting divorce proceedings would have made our marriage public — the very thing I wished to avoid, and still wish to avoid. But I am quite willing, if you yourself wish a divorce.'

'My only desire for a divorce would rise from a desire to marry elsewhere. That desire I do not have.'

She made no response. They had spoken distantly, almost as strangers. In silence Clifford gazed down into the beautiful, unwavering face of the woman who had

been his wife for four or five hours. Romance had filled the world those few hours; and now his high romance had come to such a sorry end as this!

His voice came back to him, and he asked, with sudden suspicion, 'what are you doing out here at Bradley's?'

'Why shouldn't I be here? The house is filled with guests, and most of them have very excellent standing.'

'But *you?*' he demanded sharply. 'You — when you know what Bradley is? When you've had such experiences with him?'

An interruption saved her making answer. Perhaps the thing was caused by a current of air, perhaps by the pressure of her body as she started back at the fierceness that had crept into his last words. The French windows closed with a little bang, and there was a click of a bolt.

'We're locked out!' she exclaimed in alarm. 'That's a spring-lock on the windows, and there's no knob on the outside!'

'We can call for help,' he reassured her. 'Or, since it's not more than six feet to the ground, I can easily lower you, and then jump down.'

'No, no! We must go back the same way we came!' Her agitation over so slight a predicament, when she had always met the most trying situation with cool wits, was a surprise to him. 'I know this balcony — I've been here before,' she went on. 'There's a tiny knob — a secret — just below the bottom hinge of the right window. Find it and press it.'

Still bewildered by the change in her manner, Clifford stooped and fumbled beneath the indicated hinge. Sure enough, there was a knob. This he pressed with his thumb. Noiselessly the windows swung open.

'Let's hurry back to the others,' said Mary when they had stepped into the study.

'One moment,' insisted Clifford. 'You have not yet answered my question. What are you really doing here at Bradley's?'

There were approaching footsteps in the library. 'We got back here just in time!' breathed Mary, and then Bradley strolled into the room. He regarded Clifford with the same mocking, sardonic smile.

'So — you're renewing acquaintance with Miss Regan, I see.'

'I was just asking her,' Clifford said stiffly, 'what she was doing in your house, knowing the sort you are.'

'And her answer?'

'She has made none.'

'Then I have another surprise for you, Clifford. Remember, I told you I might have several? She's here as a guest, of course, but also — but also' — Bradley's smile now held the glint of triumph, for these two had long been rivals for Mary — 'but also she has a little business connection with me. She is the best woman operative I have; handles only the biggest kind of cases. Don't mind you knowing this, Clifford; but regard it as confidential; for it would hurt a lot if the people she mixes with knew just who she was and what was her business.'

Clifford stared at Mary. 'Is this so?'

She nodded her head.

Other things were said, but Clifford's dazed brain did not register them, and in a few moments all three were back with the dancers. Mary in alliance with Bradley! The thing seemed incredible!

He was to have yet another start that evening. It came from a thing that in itself was very slight: merely Mary talking to Mrs. Fownes. But it brought a possibility leaping into his mind. Mary Regan was one

of the agents Bradley was using in blackmailing Mrs. Fownes! And in his other schemes!

Clifford went sick. He had failed in what he had tried to do in the long ago with Mary Regan. She had reverted to the cynicism and practices of her people. The romance to which he had desperately clung, even in his bitterness, now went utterly out of his life.

CHAPTER III

ON THE TRAIL OF A WIFE

MARY'S admitted alliance with Bradley, Clifford decided, automatically absolved him from his promise not to follow her or pry into her affairs. Watching her might in some way yield information that would be conclusive proof that Bradley was behind the Fownes case; might, indeed, be the best way of gaining that proof. He would follow Mary as he had never yet followed a suspect!

In the days that ensued, less than ever did Clifford think of the Fownes case in terms of freeing a vain and foolish woman from the consequences of her folly; more and more the case became to him a possible means of getting Bradley. And more and more did he hate Bradley; for Bradley, he considered, was the hitherto unsuspected influence that had drawn Mary away from him — drawn her away from becoming that fine woman he had dreamed she essentially was.

Night and day, with the help of two of his most trusted men, Clifford shadowed Mary Regan, studied her. He drove himself to the limit of his capacity; but even so, he admitted, he could not have learned so much if luck had not acted as his first assistant, for without luck's aid no detective can succeed. Mary had recently come to live at that great new hotel, the Grantham, and the manager of the Grantham and its house detective were old friends who valued Clifford. Clifford made certain requests, offering no explanations; and these requests were granted, for New York's big hotels are willing to be protected without knowing too much.

Mary was known at the Grantham as a rich young woman from the South, who had relatives of importance in the city, but who preferred the freedom of life in a hotel. Clifford, watching her from cover, saw her much in the company of semi-smart people who live in the borderland of society, and also in the company of leading figures of the stage. Two or three times she and Mrs. Fownes were together. Often Mary received some of her guests in the sitting-room of her suite.

Clifford, grim and bitter, recognized the rôle Bradley had cast her for. Bradley could not have had a more admirable decoy. She was so placed that she could pick up all kinds of valuable bits of information for Bradley from these rich, idle, irresponsible, and incautious people; bits that Bradley would know exactly how to use. Very likely it was Mary who had first learned of the existence of those combustible letters of Mrs. Fownes. Oh, she could help Bradley turn all kinds of tricks!

One matter arranged with the manager was that Clifford should secretly occupy, when he desired, a suite on the opposite side of Mary's corridor, two or three doors away; another matter was the possession of a set of duplicate keys to all of Mary's doors. He had wished that he could have installed a dictaphone in her suite; but such a procedure he regarded as useless, for so clever a person as Mary would discover it quickly and be put upon her guard.

Two days after the meeting at Bradley's, Clifford saw Mary having tea in the dim-lighted Chinese room with a well-dressed, well-mannered, sharp-featured man of early middle age, who several times reënforced his ginger ale from a silver flask. Clifford knew him at once: James Fletcher, one of the cleverest burglars out of jail, whose specialty was stealing valuables for whose

theft he could not be legally touched. Instantly Clifford's mind saw a possibility. Fletcher might be the person who had done the actual stealing of the Fownes letters.

Presently Mary and Fletcher went out and disappeared into an elevator. Clifford followed in the next elevator, and stepped out just as the two entered Mary's suite. From the opened transom of his own suite Clifford watched Mary's door, wondering what the pair were talking about.

Twenty minutes later Clifford saw the two come out and enter an elevator. Here was a chance he had been looking for; Mary would probably be gone for some time. He watched until the corridor was empty, then swiftly crossed and with his duplicate key opened Mary's door. Perhaps he might have no legal right here as a detective, he grimly told himself, but he had that legal right as a husband. Rapidly he surveyed the suite: a sitting-room, with a large wardrobe closet, a bedroom, a bathroom. Carefully and swiftly he went through Mary's belongings, thinking he might find the letters, or some clue that would definitely involve Bradley. He found nothing, however; but when he slipped out he had an idea suggested by the wardrobe closet.

There followed days of routine, in which he learned nothing new, although every day added to his conviction of the correctness of his theory. He twice again saw Mary with Fletcher, and tried to get near enough to learn what they were saying; and both times only a miracle saved him from being discovered by Mary. Once he purposely passed her, as if by chance, and bowed distantly, and received a formal nod in return.

All this while Clifford made no effort to have Bradley

watched. He felt certain that Bradley was lurking safely behind the scenes; that all the intermediate work was being done by agents; and that only through the agents could he hope to reach Bradley.

One morning two weeks after Clifford's visit to Green Manors, Mrs. Fownes appeared in Clifford's office. The wilted little butterfly was more distracted than at any previous time Clifford had seen her. She showed Clifford a note in backhand she had just received. The note was an ultimatum. Unless by noon of the following day the fifty thousand was paid over in the manner prescribed, the letters would inside an hour be in the hands of her husband.

'I suppose you have also shown this to Mr. Bradley?' Clifford asked.

'Yes. He said he hoped to get the letters for me. But he said that as a precaution I'd better be prepared to pay the money if I still wanted my husband not to find out. I'm going to see my mother — tell her everything — perhaps she'll help me with the money. But you, Mr. Clifford,' she cried with a new outburst of frenzied appeal — 'do you think there's a chance you can still do anything?'

'A chance, yes. But I cannot promise anything better than a chance.'

With that he dismissed this poor little pawn in his larger game. His manner to her had been calm enough, but within him excitement blazed. Unless intuition was all wrong, this affair was nearing its climax.

The rest of that day he haunted the Grantham Hotel. Toward seven o'clock his patience was rewarded. Mary and Fletcher came into the half-empty dining-room while the dance orchestra was in its first number. Directly above their table was a balcony, like a

box at a theater, intended for small dinner parties. Clifford slipped up into this, keeping himself from view, and strained to hear what the two were saying. Fletcher plainly had been drinking and was in an ugly mood. From their tones Clifford knew they were in bitter argument, but their voices were kept so low that Clifford could hear nothing of what was said — until these words in Mary's voice, sharp with rebuke, came to him:

'Don't talk like that here in public, you fool! Since you must talk, come on up to my room!'

At these last words Clifford was away. Two minutes later he was locked inside Mary's big wardrobe closet that he had marked out for such emergency use. After what seemed an age to him, he heard the two enter and heard the outer door close.

'We're safe enough here.' Mary's voice sounded sharply. 'Now just what is it you've been trying to tell me you want?'

'You know what I want,' rasped the ill-humored Fletcher. 'I want my five thousand before this thing goes any further.'

'I have no money to pay you with!'

'You can get it out of Bradley.'

'Get it out of Bradley yourself!' she retorted.

'You know Bradley won't see me — is afraid of being seen with me. I was a fool for turning those Fownes letters over to him before I was paid for my job. But because I was a fool once doesn't mean I'm going to be a a fool again!'

'Just what are you trying to say by that?'

'I'm saying that I'm going to be paid my money by midnight to-night. Since Bradley sent me word that I'm to deal with him through you, then it's up to you to get me my money.'

'How? You know Bradley is out at Green Manors.'

'Then go out to Green Manors and get it. Bradley always has a big roll handy. And be back with that money by midnight.'

'And if I refuse? Or Bradley refuses?'

'Then I'll blow the whole works!' Fletcher's voice was harsh with menace. 'And a swell chance Bradley will have to collect from the Fownes dame after I've told — and a swell fix he'll be in!'

'Your word will not count for anything against Bradley's. And you can't prove a thing — not with him having the letters.'

'Perhaps I can't prove anything, but I know my best chance to collect is while I've still got a chance to spoil Bradley's game for him. Now I've told you exactly what I'll do. Are you going, or are you not going?'

There was a brief silence. Tensely Clifford awaited her answer.

'All right; I'll go,' she said. 'Wait till I get my cloak.'

Clifford heard Mary Regan cross toward the closet in which he stood. Paralysis seized him as her hand fell upon the knob. The end was suddenly upon him!

'Locked!' she exclaimed. 'Now where did I put my key?' There was silence. 'I guess the cloak doesn't matter. I'll be warm enough as I am. Come on.'

The outer door of the suite opened, then closed. Clifford waited for a long minute, then crept from his hiding-place, and out into the corridor. Two minutes later he was in a taxi headed for the Pennsylvania Station. That had certainly been a close call.

CHAPTER IV

IN BRADLEY'S STUDY

FINALLY the train slowed down at Green Manors. Ten minutes after that the taxi-cab containing Mary turned into Bradley's grounds. Clifford paid off the taxi in which he had followed, and moved swiftly into the shadows of the hedged roadside. He vaulted Bradley's wall, crept through the shrubbery, and scuttled across open spaces in the lawn, until presently the house bulked before him. The overhead lamps on the porch were ablaze, and light streamed from the entrance and from the living-room and the drawing-room. Only the upper rooms were dark and that wing nearest him which Clifford knew contained the library and Bradley's study.

Somewhere in that house Mary and Bradley were talking. He simply had to know what was going on! But how was he to learn? The thing seemed impossible.

And then the windows of the library sprang alight — then the windows of the study. Mary and Bradley had obviously moved into the seclusion of the study for their conference and — and perhaps for Bradley's attempted love-making.

For a space Clifford stood under the obliterating shadow of a clump of lilac, and with fierce speculation gazed at the bright windows of the impenetrable study. If he could only hear what those two were saying! — if the impossible could only be done!

And then Clifford remembered something: that night he had talked with Mary Regan, and she had led him for privacy's sake out upon the little iron balcony that

opened from the study, and a draft had blown the windows closed and the spring-lock had clicked into place, and he had thought they were trapped until she had shown him that secret device, installed he knew by Bradley for his private comings and goings, by which the windows could be unlocked from the outside.

He crept across the lawn and around the study to that little iron balcony. The French windows were closed and the shades drawn. He reached up, caught the railing, and cautiously swung himself up to the platform. He believed he had made no noise, but he waited in unbreathing suspense half-expecting Bradley to burst through to investigate. But no one came. Relieved, he moved close against the windows and tried to use eyes and ears. But he could see nothing, and his ears caught only a faint murmur of indistinguishable voices.

He reached for the hidden knob, which controlled the lock, and pressed it. Noiselessly the windows responded, but he let them open no more than a bare half-inch. He could now see and hear.

Bradley sat perhaps ten feet away, his broad back toward Clifford. Mary, still wearing her hat and coat, sat at an angle to the windows. For an instant Clifford feared she had seen the slow opening of the windows; but if she noted that they were ajar, she must have supposed they were so when she entered, for her voice went on as before.

'I tell you,' she was saying, 'you can't afford to fool with Fletcher. He's been drinking a lot of bad liquor, and he's all ready to be ugly.'

'But didn't you make clear to Fletcher just how things stand?' asked Bradley.

'Yes. But in his drunken humor arguments don't count for anything. He said he'd done a fine job in

stealing those Fownes letters for you, and he wanted the five thousand he had been promised for his end of the job. If he didn't get it — and get it to-night — he said he'd "blow the whole works" to Mrs. Fownes.'

'Oh, no, he won't!' Bradley's voice was grimly confident. 'Fletcher may threaten, but that bird knows I've got too much on him for him ever to come across with a real squeal!'

'All the same, it might be safer to settle with him.'

'I haven't been paid myself as yet. But Mrs. Fownes is as desperate as they get from those last threats we've sent in. She told me late this afternoon that if I couldn't recover those letters for her by noon to-morrow she'd pay the fifty thousand demanded. She's just told her mother, and her mother will raise the money on some securities to-morrow morning. So you get word around to Fletcher that he'll get his split to-morrow afternoon, and that he'd better be a mighty good boy.'

'I'll do my best with him,' replied Mary. 'You have Mrs. Fownes's letters out here?'

'Yes.'

'In your safe, I suppose?'

Bradley laughed grimly. 'My safe is no safe place for those letters. Not with such a clever all-around burglar as Fletcher loose and sore — and as likely as not to try to steal the letters back.' Bradley patted the right side of his thick chest. 'The safest place for those letters is on me. With things so close to the climax, I want those letters where I can produce them at once, or get rid of them at once.'

'Of course,' agreed Mary.

There was a moment of silence. Aside from the bitterness in his heart toward Mary Regan, Clifford was filled with exultation and grim hope. There was no

longer mystery about any aspect of the Fownes case. Bradley's game was just about what he had surmised. If he could only trap Bradley, expose him in this matter, he would have evened up old scores with his old enemy and have removed a powerful enemy of all society.

Clifford pulled the windows wide open and stepped through, his automatic drawn.

'Better give me those letters!' he snapped out.

Bradley sprang from his chair, whirling about, his right hand instinctively going for his pistol. But as he saw the weapon almost in his face, his right hand dropped in an impotently clenching fist to his side. As he recognized the intruder, his dark face, which he had tried so hard to mould into the face of a reserved gentleman, contorted with an amazed rage whose one and instant desire was to annihilate.

'Clifford!' he breathed huskily. And then: 'Damn you, Clifford — I'll get your life for this!'

The man's courage was not gone. But for the moment his great self-control, his keen and daring wits, had been utterly swept away by his rage. Behind him, Clifford could see that Mary had risen, and without taking his eyes from Bradley he could see that she was very white and breathlessly tense.

'Give me those letters!' Clifford ordered again.

'Not to a house-breaker and stick-up artist!' Bradley gritted defiantly.

'I'll just take them, then. And if you make any slightest movement to resist, this gun will blow you through the walls of kingdom-come!'

His pistol pressed against Bradley's chest, watching Bradley and also the white statue of Mary, Clifford shifted a hand into the inner pocket Bradley had indicated a few moments earlier. He drew out a packet of

letters, held together by an elastic band. Still keeping Bradley covered, but with some slight aid from his pistol hand, he slipped off the elastic and counted the letters.

There were ten, as Mrs. Fownes had said. He drew out a single letter and glanced at the writing. The letter was in Mrs. Fownes's hand. Silently he examined the other nine. Without question these were the ten letters Mrs. Fownes had written in her folly — the letters that had changed that light-hearted beauty into a frenzied wreck.

Clifford snapped the elastic back upon the letters, and slipped the packet into his own inner pocket. Bradley had moved a pace or two backward and was now standing with his left hand resting upon his desk near a double row of pearl-capped push-buttons. Though Clifford noted this change of position, he attached no importance to it at the moment. The important change was in Bradley's face. The fury and the lost control of the first surprised moment were now gone, and the dark face was now a grim but otherwise expressionless mask in which dark eyes blazed steadily.

The blood of triumph was throbbing hotly through Clifford. At last he had won! At last he had Bradley just where he wanted him! He could not keep this exultant triumph out of his voice.

'I've got you with these letters, Bradley — oh, I've got you!' he cried in harsh, accusing exultation. 'I've suspected — but what I overheard you say out on that balcony, and these letters, have given me the facts I needed. What a game you've been playing on Mrs. Fownes behind your respectable front — stealing her letters, holding her up for a big price for their return, acting as her detective, and her not suspecting you at any time! And God only knows what other big

games you've been putting over behind your new front of respectability! But you're finished, Bradley! I've got you! These letters are all the evidence I need!'

Bradley's face remained a mask, and he made no response. This was perhaps the highest moment in Clifford's life — that is, in that bitter part of his life which had begun when Mary Regan had deserted him a few hours after their marriage.

Clifford turned his words upon Mary.

'And you in this too, Miss Regan!' he cried with an even harsher contempt — for there can be nothing more biting than a love that believes itself wronged and despised. 'In it with a crook like Bradley! I don't know whether the law can touch *you* — but the trial will certainly show that you were involved. I once thought there was fine stuff in you. I tried to save you and help you become your better self! And the end of it all is — I find you tied up with Bradley!'

Clifford had expected that Mary would burst out against him defiantly, for he knew well the fire and courage in her. But Mary did not. He was amazed by the look he saw in her pale, unwavering face — a face Bradley could not see. Why — why — it was almost as if Mary was excitedly glad!

Clifford's bewildered wonderment was cut into by Bradley's voice, now calm, even caustic as in the days of old.

'Clifford, if you don't want to make an ass of yourself before the public, you will kindly hand me back those letters.'

Clifford almost gasped at the effrontery of the man. 'You admit that these are the missing Fownes letters?' he demanded.

'Certainly.'

'Then I'll keep them as evidence against you!'

'I see, Clifford, that I've got to make a little explanation to keep all New York City from laughing at you.' Bradley's voice was now easy, slow, tauntingly bland. 'I was engaged by Mrs. Fownes to recover those letters from certain parties who were trying to blackmail her. I may mention that my fee was to be ten thousand dollars if I succeeded. I finally gained possession of the letters about an hour ago, and —'

'That's a lie!' Clifford broke in.

'And,' the bland and very sure voice went on, 'since this is a very delicate case, and the telephone is not always an instrument to be trusted in, I sent a note marked "Personal," immediately upon the recovery of these letters, to Mrs. Fownes herself requesting her to call at once for her dangerous property.'

'That's another lie!'

'I'm trying to be patient with you, Clifford. You spoke of evidence. I have a bit of evidence myself that I'd like to show you. It's in my desk. But you might suspect a trick if I tried to move — an attempt to shoot you. I therefore suggest that you first disarm me. You'll find my gun in my right-hand hip-pocket.'

Clifford hesitated. There was something a bit disquieting about this. But silently he took Bradley's flat automatic and searched him for other weapons.

'Now keep both guns, yours and my own, right against me,' Bradley continued, 'and shoot at my first suspicious move. With your consent, I wish to open the top drawer of my desk and hand you a bit of evidence.'

'Go ahead,' consented Clifford.

With the two pistols in his ribs, Bradley moved around to the front of his desk, opened a drawer, and drew out a single sheet of paper. This he laid upon the desk, beside his typewriter.

'That, Clifford, is a carbon copy of the letter I just wrote and sent to Mrs. Fownes. Kindly oblige me by reading it.'

'And give you a chance to pull some stunt while reading it! Bradley, I'm not to be tricked by such old stuff as that!'

'I was going to suggest, Clifford,' Bradley's even voice went on, 'that you order me into the middle of the room, where I'll have no chance to make a quick move, and that you further order me to try to keep scratching the ceiling with my finger-nails. It won't really hurt you to read that letter, you know.'

'All right — obey your own order,' snapped Clifford. 'Scrape the paint off your ceiling.'

Bradley moved to the cleared center of the room and stretched his arms aloft. Clifford gave a quick look at Mary Regan; he sensed bewilderment in her look. Whatever she might be feeling toward him, Clifford feared no violence from her. So he laid down one pistol and took up the carbon letter. It was typewritten, was dated that day, and read:

My dear Mrs. Fownes:

This is to notify you that I have just secured possession of the originals of those documents you so much desired to see, and am holding them at my residence subject to your convenience. However, I shall be glad if you can relieve me of their custody at the earliest possible moment.

Yours very truly.

Clifford looked across at Bradley. 'That letter's pure bunk!'

'What is the letter?' Mary Regan demanded in a strained voice.

Clifford handed the letter to her. She glanced it rapidly through, then looked sharply at him, then at Bradley. To Clifford it seemed, for a moment, that

there was again puzzlement in her look — genuine puzzlement. But she said nothing.

'That letter's pure bunk!' repeated Clifford.

'That letter is evidence!' retorted Bradley. 'That carbon, and its original, would be proof in any court — if you ever got me into a court — that I was merely engaged in a somewhat routine professional enterprise. Even if Miss Regan should come to your support — her evidence, considering the record of her family, would count for nothing; and anyhow, I'm sure she'd never go into court to help you — even with her help, you'd have no case. For you see there is the evidence of that letter.'

'It's easy enough to fake a letter!'

'Precisely!' Bradley agreed blandly. 'One proof of that letter's genuineness would be the acknowledgment of its receipt by the person to whom it is addressed. Now Mrs. Fownes lives but a few minutes away. She may not be at home. But when Mrs. Fownes does come home, her first act would be to hurry right here, would it not?'

'Yes — if the letter was actually sent to her.'

'Then let whether she appears, or does not appear, be the test in this matter. Suppose we wait for half an hour or so. You can spare that much time, Clifford, rather than make a blunder. And you have the letters, and I can't possibly get away from you. I make just one little personal request. This attitude of third-degree stuff — it's most tiring. I'd like to take my hands out of the air and sit down. Of course you can keep your artillery trained on me.'

CHAPTER V

BRADLEY PLAYS TRUMPS

CLIFFORD felt that there might be some trick in all this — perhaps merely a trick to gain time. But the proposal was one that could hardly be denied. At Clifford's 'All right,' Bradley lowered his powerful frame into a chair, and Clifford sat down at the desk. He kept Bradley covered, and at the same time was on his guard against any rescue party that might try to enter by way of the balcony or through the door.

The minutes passed. There was no attempt at speech among the three. Mary's face was inscrutable; Bradley's seemed to show satisfaction with the situation. Though Clifford had the letters, held all the weapons, had Bradley as his prisoner, knew Bradley was guilty, a fear began to creep through him that something was altogether amiss somewhere — that something unexpected might possibly have happened or be about to happen.

Presently there came a scurry of light footsteps through the library. Clifford trained one pistol on the door. It was flung open, and in the doorway for a brief moment stood the agitated figure of pretty Mrs. Fownes. Clifford lowered the weapon that he had held upon her.

'Excuse me,' Mrs. Fownes gasped — 'your butler said you were in your study, Mr. Bradley, and I couldn't wait to be announced.' She closed the door, and in her concern for herself ignoring such incidental matters as guns and other persons, she fairly ran across to Bradley. 'I just got your note about those

letters,' she cried in her gasping voice of fear and hope, 'and I hurried right over as you suggested. You really recovered the letters? — you really have them?'

'I recovered the letters all right and I had them until a few minutes ago,' replied Bradley. 'Then Mr. Clifford across there lost his head over some crazy idea, and took the letters from me at the point of a gun. I don't know what Mr. Clifford's idea is, since I did all the work of regaining the letters. But Clifford has the letters now, and you'll have to ask him for them.'

The frenzied woman turned swiftly upon Clifford. 'You have the letters?'

'Yes. But, Mrs. Fownes, I'm certain there's something crooked here you ought —'

'Give me the letters!' Mrs. Fownes frantically interrupted. 'I don't care what happened between you and Mr. Bradley — that's none of my affairs! The letters — that's all I care for! Give them to me! Give me the letters!'

She held out a quivering, clutching hand, and her wild pleas, her wild commands, poured on and on. For a moment Clifford regarded the anguished face of the pretty little fool. Then he made his decision: whatever had happened between the disappearance of the letters and the present moment, under the existing circumstances the letters undoubtedly should go to the agonized and repentant Mrs. Fownes. He drew them from his coat and silently handed them to her. With a gasp she jerked off the elastic band, and rapidly skimmed each letter.

'They're all here — all ten of them!' she sobbed in wild relief. 'Thank God — I'm so happy — oh, so happy!'

She turned toward Bradley. 'I — I can't tell you

how grateful I am to you for getting these letters! I'll see you to-morrow and pay your fee. I know you'll understand that — just now — I can't stay and thank you as I should — but I must get right home and destroy these dreadful things! Good-night!'

With that Mrs. Fownes was gone. There followed a moment of silence throughout the study. Then Bradley's voice broke in, almost casually, but tauntingly.

'You see, Clifford, the whole thing is exactly as I told you. That letter of mine to Mrs. Fownes is genuine; Mrs. Fownes's coming here has proved that. The whole thing, on my part, exactly as I told you, has been just an ordinary bit of professional work.'

Without answering, Clifford slumped heavily into the chair at Bradley's desk. Victory in his very hands, he had lost out. He had had Bradley caught — he had no doubt that he was right at every point; but somehow Bradley had eluded him — eluded him and gained the well-paid gratitude of the woman who was to have been his victim. How had the thing happened? How had Bradley done it?

He looked across at Bradley. His old-time and really very handsome enemy was regarding him with a smile of malignant superiority. He gazed at Mary. Again her face puzzled him. In it he half-sensed controlled surprise, wonderment.

Dazed by this swift turn of events, yet struggling to think out the problem, Clifford let his eyes drop to the desk on which lay the carbon of Bradley's letter to Mrs. Fownes. Mechanically he read it through. Then mechanically, as he tried to think, his eyes moved to the desk drawer, open before him; and mechanically he noted in the drawer the carbon of another letter to Mrs. Fownes. Mechanically he read it; it was identical

in wording with the first letter — obviously Bradley himself had made two carbons.

And then the difference of just one detail shot through the fog of Clifford's bewilderment: the letter in the drawer was dated one day earlier than the letter on top of the desk. Clifford's whole being was startled by this discovery. But he controlled himself, and instantly his mind was racing away on the trail.

A moment later he arose, his face now hard, and stood above Bradley. Everything that had befogged him, now seemed crystal clear.

'I've told you, Bradley, that you are the biggest, cleverest, and most dangerous crook in the country. I'm now going to tell you just how you worked this last trick.'

'I'm not interested in the least in anything you say, Clifford.'

'You are going to hear me just the same, Bradley. As a detective you are in a position to learn a lot about family skeletons. You learned of these letters written by Mrs. Fownes and you then hired Fletcher to steal them. From the time of Fletcher's theft those letters have been in your possession. Your agents then began to frighten Mrs. Fownes into paying for the letters' return. Then luck played into your hands when Mrs. Fownes came to you to help her.

'That much we know,' Clifford grimly went on. 'Now we come to a new set of facts. Every clever crook, when he plans a big crime, invariably spends as much time in planning his alibi and his getaway. You saw there was danger, Bradley — not much, perhaps — of there being a slip-up and the letters being found on you before they had been turned over to Mrs. Fownes in this fifty-thousand-dollar blackmailing scheme. So to protect yourself, you made this plan:

Every day, with your own hands, you have typed this identical letter' — Clifford tapped the carbon in his hand — 'and have left the sealed original in the hands of a trusted accomplice who is a servant in this house. Then if ever anything broke wrong for you, a phone message from New York, a code telegram, a signal — and within two minutes your letter would be in Mrs. Fownes's house, proving your success and good faith.

'Before I came through those windows,' Clifford drove on, 'you had no intention of handing over those letters yourself to Mrs. Fownes. But you were trapped. Things had broken all wrong for you. So you thought of your alibi. Leaning against your desk — I remember the business clearly now — you signaled your accomplice with those push-buttons, and an instant later your letter was on its way to Mrs. Fownes. There you are, Bradley! That's just how it was done!'

Bradley ostentatiously yawned mockingly up into Clifford's face.

'A fantastic theory, Clifford. But even if true, I've earned Mrs. Fownes's gratitude and a little fee of ten thousand for professional services.'

'And I have saved Mrs. Fownes from paying you forty thousand more!'

'And even if what you say against me should be true,' Bradley mockingly continued, 'you'll have mighty hard work, my son, in proving the thing to the authorities!'

'I'm not even going to try to prove it! It's enough that you have proved to me definitely just what I've believed, that you are the most adroit, resourceful, and ruthless criminal in the country. I have slipped in this one case — but at last I have proof of what you really are, and that's the beginning of success for me!

I'm going to get you, Bradley! Before the end, I'm going to get you!'

Bradley had risen; his taunting smile had changed to blazing menace.

'See here, Clifford,' he grated, 'you've butted into my affairs enough! Keep out, or you'll suffer! Oh, I'll not kill you — nothing so soft and quick as that! I'll just' — his arms crooked and his big hands clenched crushingly — 'fix you so the world won't mean anything to you, or you to the world! Now get out of here!'

Clifford did not move. The two men looked at each other unwaveringly. Defiance gazed at defiance. Both knew there was to be no quarter and no truce.

Clifford turned to Mary Regan, now pale and expressionless. 'Miss Regan, after what you've just learned, I'm certain you are through with Bradley. I am going to take you back to New York with me.'

Clifford half-thought he saw a light of impulse flash into her dark eyes; but before she could reply Bradley was exclaiming:

'Mary Regan is through with you! She was through with you long ago, before you began! On your way, Clifford! On your way!'

Clifford paid no heed to him. 'You will let me take you back to town, Miss Regan?'

She seemed to hesitate. Then that brief strange look was gone again, and her white face was again expressionless.

'No, thank you, Mr. Clifford. Mr. Bradley will see me to my train.'

'That should be enough for you!' Bradley cried, pushing his dark face nearer Clifford's. 'I've beaten you out in this Fownes matter! And I've beaten you out with Mary Regan! Mary Regan and I — I guess you understand! Now get out of here!'

A furious desire possessed Clifford to drive his fist into that outthrust, triumphant face — to cry out the truth, that Mary Regan was his wife. But he held himself in check, and glanced across at Mary. She was standing tensely erect, fingers biting into palms, staring breathlessly at the two: the figure of one who can barely control herself. But Mary Regan said not a thing.

Clifford turned and walked through the library out into the night, his whole being a turmoil of determination, of wonderment. Oh, he'd get Bradley, as he'd said! Somehow, somewhere — no doubt of it! . . . But those strange looks he had caught in Mary's face — particularly that strange look, almost of triumph, when he had taken the letters from Bradley — what could those looks mean? What could those looks possibly, possibly mean?

CHAPTER VI

TRUANT WIVES

THERE had been days of bitter debate with himself before Clifford had decided to have the matter out with Mary Regan. Now that he was at last in Mary's sitting-room at the Grantham, he gazed accusingly at her composed face: the proud face he had once loved so well.

'There is but one conclusion to be reached from your actions,' he declared in a voice which he tried to keep coldly judicial. 'I am not referring merely to your connection with the affair of Mrs. Fownes. I am referring to all your activities in your relationship with Mr. Bradley.'

'And your conclusion?' she asked.

'You have reverted to type,' he said, gazing straight into her black eyes which gave back a straight gaze into his own, and for all his effort at control not quite able to keep his heart's great bitterness out of his voice. 'After all that has been done, you have simply reverted to type. With your parentage and environment it was only natural that you should have developed an ambition to be the cleverest woman criminal of your day. But I thought I had got hold of you in time to stop you before you had really started; I thought you had definitely turned in the other direction. But I was mistaken. Blood — early influences — your early ambition — they have won you back. Yes, you have reverted to type!'

'Is to tell me this the reason you asked to see me?' she inquired in the same cold, self-possessed voice.

'That's part of my reason, yes — I wanted you to know that I had you very clearly figured out,' he responded grimly. 'But there's more to my reason. I had promised you to keep the secret of our marriage. I am here to tell you that I will keep that secret only so long as you play a straight game. If you don't play straight and I catch you, I'll arrest you. Then everything will come out.'

'Thanks for warning me. Detective Clifford arrests his own wife — quite a beautiful story for you in the papers!'

He ignored the taunt.

'I also want to tell you,' he drove at her, 'that I know you are working with Bradley. Bradley, the ablest and most ruthless crook in New York!'

'There's no doubting his ability, since you haven't caught him after all your chances,' she commented in her taunting voice.

'I'll get him yet!' Clifford exclaimed. Then his bitterness became yet more accusing; the exploded romance with his wife was still a goading anguish within his soul. 'To think that you would choose to line up with Bradley — after what I've tried to do for you and with you — when you know that Bradley's real business is blackmailing on a vast scale, hidden behind the front of his detective agency! And you, knowingly, consent to act as the chief woman tool of such a man! Well, I'll get him — and when I get him, I can hardly help getting you!'

'Is that all you came here to tell me?'

'That is all.'

'Then — '

But the ringing of her telephone interrupted Mary. She took up the receiver, listened a moment, then handed it to Clifford.

'It's your office, calling you.'

'I left word where I could be reached,' he stiffly explained, as he accepted the receiver.

He listened for a space, then said: 'If he insists on seeing me, tell him to wait. I'll be right over.'

He hung up and turned again to Mary.

'Yes, that is all,' he said, grimly, summing up his points. 'I wanted you to know that I finally realize that you are a case of reversion to type, and that I shall arrest you if I catch you, even if you are my wife. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' she returned with unbroken composure.

He bowed formally and left her without another word. All the way to his office he raged at the inconstancy of woman, and particularly at the inconstancy of that woman who was his wife.

Clifford before that afternoon had never seen the anguished young man awaiting him in his office. But he knew much about him; for who in New York City — or the whole country, for that matter — did not remember the sensational marriage, and its consequences, of Richard Hendron?

'Mr. Clifford,' young Hendron began — he could hardly have been more than twenty-six — 'I want you to find my wife! She's missing, and there's no trace of her!'

'Missing! How did it happen?'

'She went last night to visit her mother who is sick. The nurse telephoned that her mother wanted to talk to her about a private matter. That meant that I was not supposed to come along. Margerie told me not to wait up for her, since she might not be home until very late. I was tired and slept through the night. This morning Margerie had not returned. I thought she had remained with her mother. But when I called up her

mother this morning to ask about things, I was told Margerie had not been there for days.'

'And the telephone call from her mother?'

'There had been no call.'

'So! What else do you know about your wife's disappearance?'

'Nothing.'

Clifford's next questions were prompted by his memory of certain details connected with young Hendron's sensational marriage.

'What has your father done about the matter?'

'As soon as I 'phoned him what had happened, he put Mr. Bradley on the case.'

Clifford was not greatly surprised by his answer. Bradley — again!

'Pardon me. Since Mr. Bradley is already engaged, just why should you come to me?'

'I received a message advising me to put my end of the affair in your hands.'

'From whom was this message?'

'I don't know. It was typewritten — without signature — delivered by messenger. But the message was most urgent.'

Strange, thought Clifford: here was a separate mystery in itself. Only a few weeks before that Mrs. Fownes, who had previously engaged Bradley, had also been sent to him by an anonymous message which had also been most urgent.

'Suppose you tell me all your story,' said Clifford, 'including the details about how you first met your wife, and the trouble with your father.'

Clifford was not primarily interested in this story. He knew the story — or most of it. He was more interested in the character of the young husband, which the telling of the story would give him a chance

to study. Tradition to the contrary regarding millionaires' sons, Clifford decided that young Hendron was clean, straight, self-reliant; that despite his difference with his father, he was proud of the old Hendron name; that he had an almost puritanical standard of morality, with a jealous nature which might be devastating. Fine, yes — but he represented a most dangerous combination of qualities.

The story Richard Hendron told was one of those commonplace romances that are ever being spread upon the first pages of our newspapers. He had fallen in love with Margerie Phillips when she had had her first small part in a Broadway play. The proud father had been furious over the affair, had done his best to break it off; and on their marriage had severed all relations with the two, and had cut off every penny of his son's large allowance. Young Hendron, who had been studying to be an architect, had gone to work as a draughtsman at thirty-five dollars a week and had supported his wife upon this amount. The affair had indeed had all the elements of newspaper romance: chorus girl weds rich young man — boyish husband disowned by proud family, and so on. Though Margerie had never been a chorus girl.

'A few questions,' said Clifford when the story had been completed. 'You and Mrs. Hendron have really lived the year since your marriage on your thirty-five-dollar-a-week salary?'

'Yes.'

'And you've been happy?'

'Perfectly!'

'Mrs. Hendron has had no regret over being a poor man's wife? I believe she was making much more on the stage before her marriage than you are now earning.'

'She never spoke one single word of regret — though I've felt regret for what she has had to go through with me. Margerie was always saying she was sure I'd win out in time in my own profession strictly on my merits without any help from my father.'

'You spoke of your father trying to block this marriage. I suppose that was because of his family pride?'

'Yes. And then I guess father really loved me in his own way — a fierce and dominant way. He wanted me to marry into one of the families of our own social and financial level. The old and usual thing.'

'What methods did your father use to try to block your marriage to Miss Phillips?'

'He tried to dig up some scandal about her. He put this business in the hands of Mr. Bradley. But nothing was found against her — nothing at least that matters to me.'

'What did your father do next?'

'He saw my wife — Miss Phillips then — and put the matter up to her on a sordid money basis. If she went ahead with the marriage, he told her, the two of us would be paupers. If she'd break with me, she could have two hundred thousand cash at once. Margerie told him she wouldn't touch his money.'

Clifford was thoughtfully silent for a moment, the while he regarded the sensitive, jealous face of the young husband. Finally he said:

'I'll take your case on just one big condition.'

'I haven't very much money, but everything I have — '

'I'm not referring to money. I'm referring to your relations to your father. Unless it is definitely proved that unavoidable accident has caused your wife's death —'

'You think she's dead?' cried the young man.

'Death must always be considered a possibility. My one big condition is this: unless it is later definitely proved that your wife is dead or left you of her own free will, you are never to resume relations with your father. And I must have the definite say-so as to whether you are again to be friends with your father. Do you agree to this condition?'

'I agree!'

When young Hendron had gone, Clifford sat for a space, considering possibilities, reviewing the complex marital mysteries and dramas of New York City. No city in all the world had such dramas. There were the chorus girls who undoubtedly married rich men for their money; or chorus girls, or other scheming women, who led young sons of proud families into infatuation with the sole purpose of being bought off at the highest price. And there were the tired or disillusioned wives who ran off with other men. And then there were the divorce courts, with their tales of faithless love. And the love affairs that were settled by fierce passion, or fierce determination, outside the courts, often without the public's knowledge: — death — kidnapping — an elopement that may go down on the police records as 'party missing.' What a place New York was, with its six or seven million people, its riches, its ambitions, its glitter, its possibilities to hide safely in the city's multitudes, for anything to happen and yet not be known! Yes, anything might happen!

For instance, there was his own strange marriage . . .

But regarding the case of the missing Margerie Hendron, Clifford tried to keep his mind fluid, open. The explanation of her disappearance might be any of the foregoing — and might be something altogether different.

CHAPTER VII

WARNINGS

Out of the many possible solutions of the case of the missing wife, Clifford saw one solution which required that two men should be warned, be made to hesitate. Therefore half an hour after young Hendron had left him, Clifford was sitting beside the desk of the older Hendron, a gray, imperious man of fifty-five. He was the type of man, so Clifford judged, who considered his way always right and who considered any method right that would gain his way.

'I don't see why that young cub of mine should have gone to you with this matter of his runaway wife,' Mr. Hendron said sharply, 'when he knew I already had Mr. Bradley on the case.'

'I presume that since he's not on good terms with you, and you did not like his wife, your son wished an investigation made on his own account.'

'Well — what do you want from me?' brusquely demanded the older man.

'Two or three things. First I'd like your opinion on your daughter-in-law's mysterious disappearance. Do you think that disappearance is due to death?'

'I do not!'

'Then to what do you think her disappearance is due?'

'I'll tell you what!' snapped Mr. Hendron. 'I've already indicated the truth to you. You know what that girl used to be: an ordinary, cheap little actress, who liked her good time, scheming to marry some rich saphead for his money. The same old hold-up! I tried

to buy her off; she refused, thinking she could outstay me and get more money by being taken into the family. Outstay me? Not on her life! I outstayed her — at the end she knew she was licked — she got tired of the Harlem-flat, thirty-five-a-week game she'd been playing — she couldn't stand the gaff. So she's quietly disappeared into a life of luxury with a man she likes and who can pay for the luxury! Another man with a fuller pocket-book! There's the entire explanation of that girl's disappearance!'

'Perhaps,' admitted Clifford.

'There's no "perhaps" about it! It is the true and only explanation!'

'In any event, it would suit you to have that as the true and only explanation. For if I don't misjudge your son, such a situation would break things up between your son and his wife and send him back to you?'

'It would prove to him that I was right from the start about that wife of his!'

'And you'd be willing to pay a great deal of money to prove this to your son?'

'Certainly I would! Didn't I offer to buy the girl off in the first place? When my boy knows the truth, he'll come back to me and be what I want him to be!'

'Thank you, Mr. Hendron. I've asked all I wished to ask you. Now I wish to tell you something. You want your son back. If your daughter-in-law is dead, and her death is not proved to be an accident — or if your own hypothesis turns out to be the seeming truth, and it is not proved to be true to its last detail — then you will never get your son back. You know he is a sticker; he has given me his promise.'

Mr. Hendron had come choking to his feet.

'Damn you! Are you intimating — threatening —'

Clifford had also risen. The stern menace in his manner more than matched Mr. Hendron's anger.

'Rather say that I am advising you, Mr. Hendron, for your own good. Also I am warning you. You've got to have a case against your daughter-in-law that contains no single flaw. Try any trickery and you will have lost your son forever.'

'You go to —'

But Clifford had already turned away. His immediate job with the father had been completed. Within another half-hour he was in Bradley's outer office asking to see his ancient enemy. There was no attempt on Bradley's part to avoid him; within a minute he was in Bradley's big private office, which with its richness and quiet taste might have been the office of a great banker. Bradley asked Clifford to be seated, but did not offer to shake hands. There was formal courtesy between these two, but no pretense; they knew each other too well.

'What is it this time?' Bradley demanded, his black eyes steadily on Clifford. This was the first time the two men had met since the night they had clashed in Bradley's study over the letters of the hysterical Mrs. Fownes, with Mary Regan gazing on, silent and enigmatic.

'I thought we'd better have a little preliminary talk, Bradley. I'm interested in the disappearance of that young Mrs. Hendron.'

'So — you're butting into my affairs again?'

'No. You are representing the father. I am representing the young husband.'

The black eyes narrowed. 'You're not suggesting that we work together?'

'I am not. I am merely suggesting that we start out with a few facts clearly understood between us.'

'Go on.'

Clifford grimly regarded the dark masklike face behind which so many great plots had been formulated; behind which he believed was the shrewdest and best-trained criminal brain in America.

'First of all, Bradley, I'll state as one preliminary fact that you know that I know you run your detective agency chiefly as a blind. That your agency is chiefly a device for getting valuable secret information — holding people up by using that information as a threat — for turning any big trick you may want to turn.'

'You said something like all this that first night you were in my house at Green Manors,' returned Bradley, his cold eyes not flickering. 'If that's all you came here for now, you might as well be going.'

'There's a great deal more, Bradley. Mr. Hendron once tried to buy his daughter-in-law off for two hundred thousand. He's probably willing to pay that much now, or more, to get rid of her. Two hundred thousand — that might be about the size of your fee in this case, Bradley.'

'Suppose it is? What of it?'

'Just this,' continued Clifford — 'I've sized up Mr. Hendron and how careful he is in all his bargains. He doesn't spend money unless the returns are guaranteed. You'll get that fee only after you've delivered the goods.'

'What are you driving at?'

'You've just referred to our talk that first night at Green Manors. I then said something to you about human folly, and the rich opportunities for turning that folly into gold. There are two varieties of follies, Bradley: genuine follies, and manufactured follies that are frame-ups which may look as convincing as the genuine article.'

'I still don't understand what you're driving at.'

'I'm merely telling you, Bradley, that you've got to deliver the goods before you get your fat little fee. And you've got to deliver the real goods. Clever imitations will not do.'

'I'll deliver them!' growled Bradley. 'You know what this case probably is: the girl has run off with another man. If she's found out, and chucked overboard, she'll just be down where she came from. She'll be no worse off than before.'

'Possibly you're right about the case. I don't know. Not as yet. But here's the big point, Bradley. Mr. Hendron is paying you to get back his son, and the son will never come back to the father unless the case against the young wife is provable to its last point. I'm just warning you, Bradley, that if there is anything crooked about this young woman's disappearance, then your frame-up has got to be one hundred per cent perfect or you'll never collect a penny. Do you get me?'

'Guess I do, Clifford,' Bradley said easily, though his eyes continued hard. 'Any other little directions you'd like to give me?'

'Yes. There's to be no publicity in this affair. Starting the rumor that the girl has run away would help you a lot if it's your game to smash the girl's reputation. There's to be no publicity until after you've proved your case.'

'Or until after you've caught me?' Bradley drawled mockingly.

'Or until after I've caught you — exactly.' Clifford stood up. 'That's all. I believe you understand me?'

'Perfectly, my dear boy. And, believe me, it's a pleasure to play in a game where there is such perfect understanding among all parties!'

Clifford went out. Despite Bradley's mocking tone, he believed he had achieved the object of his coming. If there had been crooked work in this case, or if there was going to be crooked work, Bradley would see that the work was not raw. It would be cautious work and in this instance caution would require time. To this extent he had safeguarded young Hendron and his wife; and to this extent he had increased his own chances of solving this mystery and preserving this marriage — if the romantic marriage was worthy to be preserved.

A bitter conjecture, and following it a bitter decision, possessed Clifford. If there was anything crooked in what Bradley was now doing, then Mary Regan had her part in it. He was going to get Bradley, if he could — but despite the warning he had given her, he was going to do all in his power to keep Mary Regan out of this affair. He could not help himself in this; he simply could not let Mary Regan become the victim of her own worst elements.

His purpose had very quickly become threefold — supposing, of course, that there was a plot under way: to get Bradley; to keep Mary Regan out of the plot despite herself; to save young Mrs. Hendron and the romantic Hendron marriage.

Clifford's next procedure was to learn more of the character of the missing wife; for her character might help determine whether this case was the elopement of a poverty-wearied wife, as he had insistently been told, or was something vastly different. Half an hour after he left Bradley's office he was in the little Harlem apartment occupied by Mrs. Phillips, young Mrs. Hendron's mother. Mrs. Phillips was anything but the stage mother Clifford knew so well, the scheming, pushing sort that is more press-agent than parent. In

fact, Clifford quickly learned, Mrs. Phillips was a clergyman's widow; gray, rather slight, distinctly a gentlewoman.

She was distracted over her daughter's disappearance, but she answered Clifford's questions clearly and without reservation. No, there had been no serious love affair in her daughter's life prior to her marriage. Yes, Margerie did like fun; particularly did she like dancing, for she was an extremely good dancer; before her marriage she was always dancing about with her stage friends, and often she did not get home from these parties until rather late — sometimes not until almost morning. Yes, there was one man with whom Margerie had danced most frequently. Gerald Lawson. But that was chiefly because she had played in the same company with him during her last season on the stage and both had liked to dance so much. Dickie Hendron had been frightfully jealous of this Gerald Lawson. But there had been nothing wrong in what Margerie had done — nothing!

Mrs. Phillips showed Clifford a picture of her daughter. The missing wife was indeed a beauty. Her beauty alone might have carried her far in certain types of theatrical production had she chosen to remain upon the stage. The face was spirited, daring, perhaps even reckless. But was it the face of a young adventuress who would stop at nothing as the elder Hendron had declared?

The next two or three hours Clifford spent in talking with friends along Broadway: in a big booking office, in two actors' clubs. He talked of many things; but with each friend he managed to have the chat turn as if by chance to Gerald Lawson. The facts and opinions which he thus unobtrusively collected were in substance as follows: Lawson was an extremely good

actor on the stage, almost a star, but an extremely bad actor off the stage. He was a handsome devil with all the polished tricks of gallantry at his command. He was notorious for his affairs with women; in fact it was common talk that Lawson was unscrupulous in such affairs. A woman might dance with him a few times and nothing much be thought of it; but no woman of reputation could be in his company frequently without suffering. And yet women flocked to him. Despite his big salary, Lawson was always hard up, and would do anything for money. Just now he was not working.

Yes, a year or so ago, he had paid a lot of attention to that pretty Miss Phillips. No wonder, for she was clever and a real beauty. Lucky for her she had not fallen for him, but had married that young Hendron instead. Incidentally Lawson had been seen about lately with another beautiful young woman — a Miss Mary Regan.

Clifford acquired another significant fact. For the last day or so Gerald Lawson had not been around any of his familiar haunts.

While Clifford was collecting these facts they were automatically shaping themselves into a theory. And when he turned away from Broadway environs he believed he saw almost the whole thing: the inside story of one more instance of that eternal New York sensation — the eloping wife.

And to think that Mary Regan was mixed up in such an affair! The idea made him sick of soul.

Whatever might be the effect upon his attempt to clear up this case and capture Bradley, Clifford had to eliminate Mary from the business. That was his first duty. There was only one way to do this with such a person as Mary: the direct way.

He strode rapidly across to the Grantham, and sent up his name. A few minutes later he was again in his wife's sitting-room.

'I suppose it is something very important which causes you to intrude twice in one day,' she greeted him haughtily.

'It is,' he grimly responded. 'I've come to tell you to get out of this business of the disappearance of that young Mrs. Hendron.'

'Pardon me if I remark that I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I expected you to say something of the sort. And, just to show you that I'm on to Bradley's whole game, I'll tell you just what his game is. The elder Mr. Hendron broke with his son because of the son's marriage to a young and unknown actress, and will have nothing to do with his son so long as the son sticks to his wife. The son has been sticking. Mr. Hendron wants his son back, and would pay one hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, perhaps much more, to get him back. The only way he sees to get the son back is to break up the marriage. You see I've got the game worked out clearly so far!'

'Very clever of you. Is there some more?'

Clifford was now driving home his conjectures as proven facts. 'Here's where Bradley enters; I don't know exactly what your part in the game is, but I know you're in it. Bradley undertakes to smash the marriage and bring back the son to his father; if he succeeds, there's a fortune in this for Bradley. Perhaps the father doesn't know what Bradley's game is — the father's only interested in results — but here's the game. Its whole purpose is to make young Hendron believe his wife is worthless and untrue to him. That will turn the trick. Before her marriage she was rather gay —

played around a lot with that actor Gerald Lawson. You know Lawson, and you know what a rotter he is. Last night Mrs. Hendron disappeared and hasn't been heard of since. In reality last night Mrs. Hendron was kidnapped by some plan of Bradley — a plan in which Lawson, for his price, figured from the first bit of action. She was probably drugged, and she will be kept drugged for two or three days. Lawson will probably do nothing to harm her beyond seeing that she's kept sufficiently doped. Then things will be fixed so that young Hendron discovers her under just the proper compromising conditions. With her will be that lady-killer Lawson. The story will be that she got tired of her hard life, ran away with Lawson, and the scene that is discovered is an interrupted illicit honeymoon. There you are — the whole game! Another spectacular case of woman's folly!'

'But your Mrs. Hendron can easily upset any such game, if she wants to, by declaring the truth.'

'A lot of good that will do Mrs. Hendron! There is the foundation of fact that she and Lawson were formerly friends. Lawson will declare she came with him of her own accord; and if there is any honest physical examination about the drugging, Lawson can say that she had not been sleeping well, and took the drug herself and must have taken an overdose. The thing will have the appearance of a woman, frightened when caught, trying to lie out of her mad folly. Young Hendron is a fine young fellow; but he's jealous by nature, and frightfully jealous of Lawson. He'll not believe his wife's story. That marriage will be smashed, and that innocent young wife will be smashed — utterly smashed. The son will go back to his father, and Bradley will get his folly's gold. There — you have it all!'

Mary regarded Clifford for a moment with un-

changed expression. Then she asked calmly: 'And you? What are you going to do about it?'

'I'm not telling you. Except that I'm going to make you step out of the game! That's why I'm here now, to warn you and force you to step out of this game!'

'Force me by what methods, if you please?'

'Two methods. First, if I catch you, I'll arrest you, as I told you earlier to-day. There will be a most serious conspiracy charge.'

'And your second method?'

'You have your own strong motive for wanting to keep our marriage a secret. If you do anything further to help put this game across, I shall promptly make our marriage public. This is all I came here to say to you. Good-bye.'

For the second time that day Clifford gave his wife the stiffest of bows and turned and went out.

CHAPTER VIII

HONEYMOON HOTEL

CLIFFORD believed thoroughly that he was correct in his summary of the plot he had just made to Mary. Here again was one of the clever, standardized schemes by which undesired wives, seemingly guilty, are cast out of the family by divorce proceedings. A plot most dangerous to the chief parties, but he knew that the confident Bradley believed he could outwit all danger to himself.

Of course he had warned Bradley, and warned Mary Regan. On the face of things, this procedure of his might seem foolish. But it was not. For years he and Bradley had known or guessed the major moves of the other: had almost waged their battles in the open, and victory had been decided almost wholly by superior wit in using these known facts. So there had been no great loss of advantage in showing his cards to Mary and to Bradley.

His major problem, as Clifford saw it, was to locate Gerald Lawson and Mrs. Hendron, and snatch the young wife away before Bradley could stage before his little private audience his carefully planned bit of high-colored domestic melodrama. Clifford estimated that he had no more than a day or two in which to act. An absence of about three days on the part of the runaway wife before Bradley and the father and the husband discovered her — just such a period and just such an elopement, so Clifford decided, would suit the requirements of Bradley's game.

Clifford had to work rapidly, or else fail. Just where

might Gerald Lawson and Mrs. Hendron be? Clifford considered the possibilities intently, trying to think as he believed Bradley had previously thought things out. Real elopers would probably have taken ship for some foreign port, or else have fled by train to some distant part of America. But flight to a remote spot would not fit Bradley's plans; he would want the couple close at hand, so that he could bring his audience swiftly to the stage when his trap was ready to be sprung and his drama to be played to its unhappy curtain.

The two were right here in New York City, or at some resort hotel out on Long Island, or up in Westchester County, or over in New Jersey — some place that could be easily reached by a motor drive of an hour or two.

Clifford eliminated New York City, where one or more persons live in every twelve-foot cube of room-space. In a moment of consciousness Mrs. Hendron might cry for help, and be heard by some one a few feet away. That would be dangerous for Bradley's scheme. For the same reason Clifford eliminated all the big resorts and the big crowded resort hotels.

He had it! One of those hotels that go in for the cottage plan. A little cottage set away in seclusion from the parent building — where any possible outcry would pass unheard — which cottage would later be referred to as a 'love nest': that would be the most effective and plausible setting for a runaway honeymoon.

But there were hundreds and hundreds of such hotels within an hour or two of New York: how was he to find the particular hotel within the brief period in which he had to act? He could not personally investigate so great a number. And he could not ask assistance of the police; that would mean publicity, and he

wished to avoid all publicity — that is, until he had snatched Mrs. Hendron out of her danger, and had caught Bradley in his own trap. He thought and thought — feverishly but patiently; for Clifford had long since learned that the best part of a detective's work is often done in the quiet of his own office.

At last Clifford thought he saw the way. Presently he was seated in the private office of Preston, manager of the Grantham Hotel, who had helped him in many matters and for whom he had done many favors.

'Preston, are you game to do something for me — without knowing too much about the affair?'

'Sure, Clifford,' promptly returned the manager. 'Shoot your stuff.'

'You know Gerald Lawson?'

'After him, are you? Of course I know him. That boy's as bad as he is charming.'

'I want you to help locate him for me. I think he's within fifty or seventy-five miles of New York, staying at one of those country or seaside hotels that have cottages for guests who wish extra seclusion. He'll be registered at the hotel, of course, but will be living in one of the cottages. There's a woman with him.'

'A woman with him is no new story for Lawson,' Preston remarked dryly.

'But I think this woman is a square woman. She doesn't know her situation — she's a victim. I want to save her. And incidentally I can save that particular hotel a lot of nasty publicity which it will surely get if I don't locate Lawson mighty quick. There's where your interest comes in — rather, the interest of all hotel men.'

'I get you. What do I do?'

'You have a Hotel Association, haven't you? A kind of protective organization?'

'Yes. And mighty active too.'

'I want to use it. But I have no power there, and I want to use it through you. I want you to give a description of Lawson to the Association — no need giving his own name, he's probably registered under another — and have the description 'phoned to every hotel in the region I've mentioned that has cottages connected with it. I want the description worked into a discreet, unsuspicious, natural question that will not excite talk. If Lawson got a hint that inquiries were being made about him, he'd instantly vanish, taking the woman with him. Now how far can you help me?'

'I can do all you ask,' Preston replied promptly. 'And I can divide those hotels into groups and can arrange to set a dozen or so clever men calling up those hotels. It will all sound like regular Hotel Association work.'

'Good! You couldn't do better!'

For the next half-hour Clifford worked with Preston on the description of Lawson and on the casual questions that were to be broadcast by telephone. When Clifford left the Grantham, he was thinking feverishly upon another phase of the case: how he could get evidence against Bradley? He quickly perceived that there was no way to do this until he had located Mrs. Hendron. Finding Mrs. Hendron — all depended upon that.

Within the next hour Clifford began to be flooded with results from the plan he had worked out with Preston. But there was nothing remarkable in these dozens of possible honeymooning Lawsons, considering the rather general description of Lawson that had been sent out, and considering that some ten million people lived in the area prescribed to Preston and that this was the favorite month for honeymoons.

By this time the night was well advanced. There was no way to identify the one man out of these dozens of possible suspects except by gaining a glimpse of them all, and that could not be done until the morrow. Clifford felt sure Bradley would not spring his trap for another day or two: the longer Bradley could hold the matter off, the more effective would be the scandal and the greater Bradley's success.

Clifford swiftly organized his plan for the search. He recruited operatives he knew and trusted from other detective agencies, and to all, except two, he gave a list of honeymoon couples they were to look over. Each man was to motor forth in the morning alone — by riding alone they would be able to cover more territory — and each was to report by telephone to the office every half-hour or so. The two excepted men were to remain in the office as reserves, ready to ride in a high-powered car when summoned to the spot where Lawson had been found.

So much arranged for, there was nothing for Clifford to do before the morning except to try to keep young Hendron in hand. Despite Hendron's high-strung, impetuous temper, his passionate jealousy, Clifford more and more liked the young man for having defied his father, married where he loved, and started in at the bottom to build his own career.

Clifford ordered young Hendron to remain constantly in his apartment that night, ready to receive reports. This the frantic Hendron promised to do. But when Clifford reached his office early the next morning, a message was awaiting him from Hendron. Hendron had received word from his wife in Troy and had rushed up-State to bring her home. This smelled suspicious to Clifford. He felt that he had blundered in not keeping Hendron constantly under his own

guardianship, but it was now too late to correct his error.

For his own share of the general survey Clifford had chosen a half-dozen couples honeymooning at various hotels out on the North Shore of Long Island. At one summer hotel, then another, he cautiously managed to get a glimpse of one of the grooms in the list supplied by Preston; in each case there was a likeness to Lawson, but nothing more. Every half-hour or so he telephoned in to his office hoping for news and ready to speed to the retreat in which Lawson had been located. But none of his other searchers had had better fortune than himself.

Thus passed all of that day. When evening began to fall, Clifford was desperate. His whole plan of action had been based upon a supposition — a reasonable supposition, he had believed; and now his plan had all but failed. For the conviction had been growing upon him that Bradley would feel that he had waited long enough for his effect and would act that night.

At this time Clifford was reduced to one chief satisfaction. By his straightforward talk — yes, by his threats — he had kept Mary Regan out of this affair. Indeed that was something!

Twilight was swiftly changing into darkness when Clifford motored toward one of the last places on his list, Cedar Top Inn, some seventy miles out. The very sight of the place revived his ebbing hopes. The place was ideal for Lawson's and Bradley's purpose — that is, if Clifford was right in his original deduction. The inn itself was small and charming, perched on a knoll looking down upon Long Island Sound. Scattered about among the cedars and locusts were perhaps a score of small cottages, each secluded behind a high hedge or an especially planted screen of trees, and

each having its own driveway. Yes, an ideal place, indeed, for a very private honeymoon!

As Clifford entered the lobby of the inn, he noted a row of telephone booths and a girl at a switchboard. The next moment he was talking to the affable young clerk about his friend Gardner.

'I was motoring by and I thought I'd drop in on my friend Mr. Gardner,' he said. Gardner was the name on his list of bridegrooms for Cedar Top Inn. 'He's staying here, isn't he? — with his new wife?'

'Yes, sir,' replied the clerk. 'They have the Three Pine Cottage, the last cottage on the north road.'

'Thanks.' Clifford bought half a dozen cigars, then lowered his voice and smiled in an embarrassed, ingratiating manner. 'As a matter of fact,' he confessed, 'I have never met Mrs. Gardner. I'd be obliged if you could tell me what she's like; it would make things a bit easier for me when I call.'

'I'm sorry, but I can't help you there, sir. Mr. Gardner had reserved the Three Pine Cottage in advance and Mrs. Gardner was sick when they arrived three nights ago. None of us have seen her. Mr. Gardner has been taking entire charge of her, even to making up her bed and carrying in her tray which is sent over to her. He's very devoted to his wife, sir. Mighty unlucky, being sick like that, at the beginning of one's honeymoon.'

Clifford had thrilled with new hope while the clerk had been speaking. This was just how Bradley and Lawson would have managed things. But he controlled himself.

'Indeed it is unlucky,' he concurred sympathetically. 'Since Mr. Gardner is having this trouble, I'll not intrude upon him; and I'll be obliged to you if you don't mention to him that an acquaintance dropped

around. He might worry, thinking he hadn't been properly hospitable.'

The clerk promised. Clifford lit a cigar and his lazily roving eyes seemed casually to observe the row of telephone booths and the girl at the switchboard, and he remarked in the tone of one who is merely killing time:

'You have an unusually complete telephone outfit here at the inn. But I suppose that's because the cottages have no telephones.'

'No, sir. Every cottage has its own telephone which connects with the switchboard here and the cottage people can call any place they like.' The young clerk smiled. 'But you see a lot of big business men spend their vacations here, mostly for the golf. They like to keep in touch with their offices, but don't like to telephone from their cottages or rooms for fear that the switchboard operator may listen in and there may be a leak. You see they handle some big and delicate deals over the 'phone. That's why we put in the booths. The wires from the booths are not connected with our own switchboard.'

Clifford had learned all he desired to know. A few more inconsequential remarks, then Clifford told the clerk he felt like strolling around the grounds for a while. He took the north road and within three minutes he was inside the high shrubbery that enclosed Three Pine Cottage. The house was a small affair of three or four rooms; all the inn cottages were built on the non-housekeeping plan, so had no need of kitchen and dining-rooms.

In another minute Clifford was stooping below a window peering in beneath a drawn shade, into what was obviously the living-room. At what he saw triumph leaped within him! He had been right!

On the other side of the room was a couch, and on it, half-supporting herself on her left elbow, her thick black hair falling disheveled about her shoulders, was pretty Margerie Hendron. She was in a lacy, gorgeous, flame-colored negligee, which almost shouted of guilty passion. A steamer rug covered the lower part of her body. Looking craftily down upon her, but out of her range of vision, stood the handsome Gerald Lawson. On a near-by table were two empty champagne bottles with glasses, and beside these was a small vial. That small vial, Clifford felt certain, contained the sleeping potion which, it would be alleged, Margerie Hendron had taken.

Clifford gritted his teeth at the perfection of this stage-setting. Fury filled him. Yes, here was another pretty instance of how wives are made unfaithful for purposes of publicity, estrangement, and then divorce!

CHAPTER IX

THE WOMAN ON THE COUCH

For all the heavy, vacant stare in Margerie Hendron's face, Clifford saw that she was beautiful and good — worth the love and fight and sacrifice of the emotional Dick Hendron — and his heart went out to her. Obviously she was not conscious of her situation.

'Dick,' she mumbled thickly, 'Dick' — and with her husband's name on her lips her head slumped back upon the couch, and she was again instantly in her stupefied sleep.

Gerald Lawson lit a cigarette, pulled the steamer rug up over her shoulders, and moved softly about the room with the manner of one who is waiting. That handsome actor, that charmer of ladies, plainly felt that he was almost through with his rôle in this drama. Just the one scene before the final curtain — that was all.

Then the telephone, which was in the sitting-room, began to ring. Lawson swiftly muffled the clamor with a hand upon its twin bells and softly spoke into the receiver.

'Yes . . . You say New York wants to speak to me on the special wire? . . . Have New York hold the 'phone. I'll be right over.'

Lawson slipped out of the house, locking it. For a moment Clifford wondered what to do. He might rip through the screened window and carry off the unconscious Margerie Hendron; but he now instinctively felt that such a measure, with all signs of guilt left behind, would not save the marriage of the Hendrons —

and certainly it would not help him capture Bradley. No, he must get his men out here, as witnesses and as aids in the capture of Bradley. Nothing could happen to Margerie Hendron in the meantime. So Clifford stealthily followed Lawson to the inn.

Standing in deep shadow, Clifford saw Lawson pass through the inn's bright main entrance. What might be being planned in there? — or what might be the talk passing over one of those direct wires to New York? A message to Lawson to be all ready to spring the trap? Yes, that was it!

And then Clifford's heart jumped a beat. From out the darkened side entrance off into the night hurried the unmistakable figure of Mary Regan.

There was a new inrush of bitterness. So Mary was in this affair, after all, despite his warning! . . . For a moment Clifford hesitated whether to follow her; then he decided against it. She was merely one of this ruthless crew; and furthermore, his first business now was to get a message to his waiting aids.

Clifford slipped into the darkened side entrance, out of which Mary had come, and from which he could see Lawson in a booth. Minute after minute passed, the while Clifford's bitterness against Mary grew more inflamed. Then Lawson stepped from the booth and swiftly passed out of the hotel.

Instantly Clifford was in one of the booths, and almost instantly had his office on the wire. He told his waiting men where to come — ordered them to pick up one or more Suffolk County officers to help legalize the arrests — gave the switchboard girl a dollar — and was again out in the night. That was about the quickest telephone call he had ever put through. Lawson could not now be more than halfway back to the cottage.

As Clifford turned again into the north road, there was a rushing roar. Startled, Clifford leaped aside into the grass, and a big car, all lights blazing, muffler open, swept by him and swung lurchingly into the main highway. Seventy-five miles an hour at the very least. Clifford swore at such recklessness. Those rich speed maniacs — the sort that are ever about such smart places as Cedar Top Inn — who were forever pressing their powerful motors to the limit, they should be given a long stretch in jail, every one of them, instead of an occasional fine of a few dollars!

Presently Clifford was again on his knees peering into the sitting-room. There, her face turned to the couch's back, steamer rug drawn far up over her shoulders, was the figure of the drugged young woman. The handsome Lawson was again pacing back and forth, restlessly looking at his watch and then over at his insensible companion. There was no doubt in Clifford's mind that the New York message to Lawson had been that Bradley was starting. But then his own orders had gone out not a minute later, and he knew his men would make better speed than Bradley. They'd forget speed laws and would be here in an hour and a half. He did not know yet exactly how he was going to get Bradley — but he was going to get him.

With grim tensity Clifford peered into the room and waited.

Thus an hour and more went by. So many cars had passed along the north road that their passage had become a commonplace. Then suddenly Clifford heard a car turn into the driveway which was on the side of the cottage opposite from where he stood. In sudden consternation Clifford went running around the house just as three men fairly hurled themselves through the door of the cottage. They were Bradley,

the older Hendron and young Hendron. Even in that frantic moment Clifford realized afresh that the call from Troy to young Hendron had been merely a trick to get the young man into Bradley's possession.

'What did I tell you?' exclaimed Bradley's big voice in triumph. 'Ran away with Lawson! There they are — just look at them!'

All three were now in the sitting-room. Clifford, sick of soul, looked on from behind the others. The drugged figure huddling beneath the steamer rug had not moved, but Lawson had taken a stand between them and the couch, half-defensive, half-cowering. He really was a most skillful actor, equipped for any rôle.

'What do you mean, breaking in on a man and his wife like this?' he demanded.

'Aw, cut out the bunk!' ordered Bradley. 'We've caught the pair of you, Lawson.'

'My name is not Lawson,' the actor said with his fine stage dignity. 'My name is Gardner. And this is Mrs. Gardner.'

'I told you to cut out the bunk!' Bradley snapped again. 'We've seen you behind the footlights too often not to know you are Gerald Lawson. And this woman you've run off with is the wife of young Mr. Hendron. And you might as well admit everything!'

Lawson moistened his lips, then lifted his shoulders defiantly. He was certainly acting his part well.

'All right — you've got me — I'm Lawson. But I'm not admitting anything else. And, anyhow, I don't just see what you are going to do to a man who runs off with a wife who is tired of her husband. Or what you're going to do to the woman. Jail us?'

'Damn you!' young Hendron cried and leaped frantically at Lawson.

Bradley, on the watch for such an outburst, caught

Hendron with practiced hold and gripped him helpless.

'Our business here just now, young man,' he said, 'is not to beat up the other man. It's to get evidence. And we're getting it. Give an eye to that table. Champagne. Some little booze party — what? — along with all the rest. A gay pair these two!'

The elder Hendron was clutching his son's shoulder. 'Take a good look, Dick,' he ordered grimly. 'Here's the proof that your wife's exactly what I've been telling you all the while!'

The broken young man shivered all through. 'Yes, father — I've been a fool!' he admitted in anguished tone. 'Margerie! Margerie! Why doesn't she speak?' he cried.

'Probably too drunk,' explained Bradley.

'No,' put in Lawson, 'she took a sleeping-powder.'

For the first moment Clifford had been partly stupefied by the swiftness of the climax, partly fascinated to see the working-out of Bradley's scheme. He had remained in the background, unnoted by the others. Now, with a frantic sense that victory and that the saving of a marriage were being snatched away, he strode to the fore and seized young Hendron's arm.

'Don't believe what you see or what they say!' he cried. 'It's a frame-up!'

'You here!' exclaimed Bradley, in a half snarl, his face going black.

'Yes, I'm here, Bradley, and I'm here to tell this young man and his father just what your trick is!' Clifford turned again to young Hendron, but spoke also at the father. 'This is all a frame-up, I tell you, with Lawson hired by Bradley to play his part. Mrs. Hendron was drugged — kidnapped — kept under the influence of drugs ever since! She's practically ignorant of all that's happened, and she's utterly innocent!

The whole thing is a diabolically clever scheme to ruin a fine and innocent wife!'

Bradley had regained his composure. He addressed father and son in even tone.

'You will remember that this tale is exactly the story I told you would be told in case Mrs. Hendron cared to put in a defense. That story is all bunk. There was no kidnapping. Mrs. Hendron came of her own wishes. And if she's now drugged, that also is because of her own desire. I told you she was a drug addict.' He picked up the vial beside the empty wine bottles. 'Here's proof that she's a dope. Read the label: "Morphine sulphate." I believe, gentlemen, you have all the evidence you require.'

'I tell you it's all an infernal frame-up!' persisted Clifford.

But the elder Hendron ignored Clifford's furious declaration.

'Son,' he said grimly, 'you have here proof of all I've been telling you for over a year. Don't you think that you're through with her now, and that you'll come back to me?'

The sensitive, overwrought young husband was in a state bordering on hysterical collapse.

'Yes — I'm through with her!' he panted. 'Yes — I'll come back to you!'

Clifford then realized that he had lost out; that the poor innocent wife had lost out; and — yes — that this frenzied young husband had also lost out. Bradley had been too shrewd for them.

Bradley gave Clifford a sidelong glance of triumph, then brusquely said to the two Hendrons:

'I guess that's all we want here. Let's be going.'

Clifford was stimulated to a last desperate effort. Again he clutched the arm of the young husband.

'Don't believe this, for God's sake!' he appealed. 'At least give your wife a chance to speak in her own behalf! Rouse her, and you'll see that her story agrees with mine!'

Young Hendron threw off Clifford's hand. At this moment he was no longer the trembling figure stunned by proof of his wife's faithlessness. He was ablaze with the fury of jealous love that has been deceived.

'I'll rouse her,' he cried — 'but not to listen to any such story! I'll rouse Margerie, to tell her what I think of her!'

He swiftly crossed, threw back the steamer rug, and clutched the shoulder of the huddled woman.

'Margerie!' he cried savagely, shaking her. 'Margerie! Wake up!—wake up! You've got to hear me!'

The figure moved, came slowly to her feet, and lifted her face to the four men. At the sight of that face all four men fell back in supreme amazement. The sleep-heavy face that turned stupidly, from one to another of the men, was the face of Mary Regan.

CHAPTER X

MORE MYSTERY OF WOMEN

At length Mary's roving, blinking eyes fixed upon Gerald Lawson.

'What's all this mean, Gerald?' she slowly asked in puzzlement. 'Who are all these men and how do they come here?'

Gerald Lawson did not answer, nor did any of the others. All were still too dumbfounded to speak.

'Oh, I understand, Gerald,' Mary continued — 'friends you invited in.' And then still stupidly but reproachfully: 'But you should have told me they were coming, so they would not have found me asleep. I'm very sorry, gentlemen, to have received you like this.'

It was young Hendron who first recovered from vocal paralysis.

'My God!' he whispered tensely — 'who — who are you?'

Mary's eyes opened wide.

'I'm Mrs. Gerald Lawson. Although we're registered here under the name of Gardner. I supposed you'd called to congratulate me because' — with a shy glance at Lawson — 'because, you know we're out here on our honeymoon. We've been here two or three days.'

Clifford's heart was racing wildly. After all Mary wasn't — wasn't — He looked at Bradley. In Bradley's face amazement was being succeeded by bewildered rage. But Clifford caught a commanding glance pass swiftly from the sleepily surprised eyes

of Mary to Bradley. Words that were on Bradley's lips were suddenly checked.

Again young Hendron spoke. 'Not Margerie — not Margerie!' He turned fiercely upon his father and Bradley. 'What's this you've tried to put over on me? Where's Margerie? What have you done with Margerie?'

Before either could reply, the telephone rang. Mary picked it up.

'Yes, this is Mrs. Gerald Lawson . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Hold the wire and I'll see.'

She turned to the men.

'Does one of you happen to be Richard Hendron?'

'Yes — I am,' said the young man.

'The clerk at the hotel is speaking,' Mary explained. 'He's been trying to locate you for some time. He says he has a New York message to relay to you.'

Young Hendron took the receiver.

'Yes, this is Richard Hendron. . . . What! . . . What! . . . What! . . . My God!'

He slammed the receiver upon its hook and whirled about. His face that had been anguish-tortured was now radiant.

'Margerie's safe at home!' he cried out sobbingly. 'Been trying to locate me to tell me what's happened. I've been a fool! An infernal fool! Whatever she tells me I know will be the truth! I'm off for New York!'

Halfway to the door he whirled and came back, his eyes hard and accusing upon his father.

'There's something mighty damned phoney about this lay-out here, dad. You and your detective, Mr. Bradley, almost tricked me — almost made me lose Margerie. Now you come clean with me, dad, or I'm through with you forever!'

The domineering autocrat of a father hesitated.

Clifford watched the clashing gazes of father and son, wondering just what had been the father's part. Then the older man spoke.

'I'll come clean, Dick. I've honestly believed from the start that Margerie was not the wife for you — was everything I've said to you — and I've been willing to pay out half my fortune to make you see the truth. I engaged Mr. Bradley to help me prove it. He was to place temptation in Margerie's way — she was to yield to that temptation because of her natural weakness — and you were to be confronted with the evidence. To that extent I entered into a conspiracy. I wanted to arrange an acute situation which would show you, without any possible question, just the sort I believed Margerie was. But that was the limit of my plotting. Until this moment I was as much deceived as you were. I was more deceived.'

He turned his blazing eyes upon Bradley.

'Bradley, what you've done smells rotten,' he snapped. 'You almost put something over on me. Anything you've got to say for yourself?'

'Mr. Hendron, you're being —' Bradley began, but was again checked by a swift look from Mary. 'I guess it was all a mistake,' he growled. 'The best of us make mistakes.'

'I don't believe that this was a mistake,' returned Mr. Hendron. 'I now might be inclined to believe Mr. Clifford's statements, if we had found Margerie here instead of another lady. I don't pretend to understand this present situation. But I understand this much, Bradley, and you'd better understand it, too: I'll pay you your legitimate expenses in this matter, after they have been checked up, but not one penny more. And when I've paid that, I'm through with you forever.'

The grim old figure turned his back on Bradley and again faced his son.

'Dick — I'm the one who has been a fool,' he said abruptly, in the tone of surrender. And then hesitantly: 'If you'll let me, Dick, I'd like to go home with you as fast as our car will take us — go to your Margerie and tell her how much I think of her. And after what's happened, I'll believe any story she has to tell us.'

'Father!' cried the young man as the long-estranged hands gripped. 'Father!'

As the car containing the reunited father and son roared away from the house, Mary was no longer the bewildered, drug-stupefied bride, interrupted from a heavy sleep. She was pale, dominant, in her composure. Clifford regarded her with wonderment: wonderment over what had just happened, and over what was still to happen.

Bradley had been glowering at her. His black fury now burst forth.

'What's the idea? Double-crossing me — you — you —'

'Better be careful how you address me, Mr. Bradley,' she interrupted him sharply.

'But see here — you've just beaten me out of perhaps a hundred thousand! And that Mrs. Hendron has really been here all along!'

'I'm not breaking with you, Mr. Bradley,' she returned in her cold voice, dark eyes hard upon him. 'But understand this — I am not in with you in any game to make money by dragging an innocent woman down into the mire.'

She turned to Clifford and spoke in the same cold voice.

'Believe it or not, as you choose — but I did not know the nature of this plot until you called yesterday, outlined it to me, and insulted me by accusing me of being concerned in it.'

'I — I beg your pardon,' stammered Clifford.

'I do not care for your apologies. But I do want it known that there are certain things I do not stoop to. Of course you were right about the plot, and if you hadn't accused me as you did I wouldn't have been prompted to do what I have done. To that extent your insult was of service.'

'How — how did you do it?' asked the bewildered Clifford. 'I saw the real Mrs. Hendron here myself.'

Her reply was directed equally at Clifford and Bradley. Lawson she ignored.

'I learned of the whereabouts of Mrs. Hendron and Mr. Lawson only in time to reach here an hour or so ago. Even if I had been able to carry Mrs. Hendron off, a suspicious situation almost as bad as the original plot would have remained. To allay suspicion a woman had to be found here by the Hendrons, and a woman Mr. Bradley and Mr. Lawson would not dare repudiate; the situation had to seem real enough of its sort to eliminate Mrs. Hendron. I spoke to the clerk over at the inn, and got him to 'phone over here to Mr. Lawson that he was wanted on a private New York wire. That got him out of the cottage long enough for me to get Mrs. Hendron into my car and for me to substitute for Mrs. Hendron.'

Clifford now understood the mad flight of the car which had almost run him down as it had swung into the main road.

'But that telephone call from Mrs. Hendron?' inquired Clifford. 'She couldn't have been more than a little over half way to New York when it came.'

'You will remember that it was a relayed call. That call was a fake. I fixed it up with the clerk. The clerk was to keep watch, and a little after a car drove into the grounds of this cottage he was to relay the message here. That is all there is to my part of it. But as for Mrs. Hendron, there is a doctor in the car working on her; she'll be partly recovered by the time she reaches home. She probably will recall very little of what has happened, and anyhow you've just heard the older Mr. Hendron say he'll believe anything she tells. For her and her husband, and the father, this will be a story with a happy ending.'

Clifford gazed at her in continued amazement. She, whom he had suspected of complicity, had saved this situation when he had practically lost it!

'But — but —' he marveled, 'to do this you had to put yourself into a compromising situation. And with a man like Lawson.'

'I haven't much of a reputation to lose,' she replied. 'Besides, I'm inclined to believe that neither Lawson, Mr. Bradley nor any one else will want to talk much about this affair. And now good-night to you all.'

'One moment,' exclaimed Clifford. 'Since your car is gone, may — may I not drive you into the city?'

'I do not care to accept any courtesy from a person who believed me capable of the thing of which you yesterday accused me,' she returned coldly. 'I shall spend the night at the inn.'

With that she turned her back upon all three men and walked out of the cottage.

For a long moment Clifford and Bradley gazed at each other. Chagrin and anger were in Bradley's powerful face. Lawson, nervously biting his nails, stood by the table on which were the empty bottles; he had never before played so futile a part in so complete a failure.

'Anyhow, Clifford,' Bradley snapped, 'you didn't win!'

'Nor did you!' retorted Clifford. 'But Mrs. Hendron did!'

And then Clifford exclaimed tauntingly: 'Folly's gold, Bradley — this is at least one case out of which you mined no gold!'

Bradley swore savagely.

Clifford strode out to his car and started for the city, thinking not of this one more instance where he and Bradley had fought to a draw, but thinking of Mary Regan. Mystery was his trade, his profession; but, well — he simply could not solve Mary Regan, and he wondered if the day would come when he ever would.

CHAPTER XI

AN ENEMY FORBEARS

CLIFFORD had not seen Mary Regan, or heard from her, for several bitter weeks after she had forbiddingly swept from his presence with the contemptuous announcement that she was going to spend the night at Cedar Top Inn. Then the urgent call had come to him from Mrs. Forsythe out at Green Manors. For over an hour Clifford listened patiently to the pleading, frightened, widowed mother and the humiliated, frightened, fatherless son as together they told him of the skeleton in the Forsythe family closet.

Just the old, old story of Broadway and a young man with too much money, that and nothing more was the cause of the family trouble, Clifford summed the affair up to himself when he finally made his escape from the splendid summer home of the Forsythes. Just the old, old story — but with a new and hidden element of interest which had flashed thrillingly upon Clifford during Mrs. Forsythe's agitated recital. His instinct, his knowledge of the ways of his old enemy, told him that Bradley was subtly behind this affair. And Clifford felt, with grim determination, that the true importance of this Forsythe matter was that it gave him yet another chance to catch Bradley at his criminal practices and put him away where he would no longer be a constant menace to all rich, high-placed people who, in either innocence or guilt, had at some time been led into secret folly.

Clifford's walk to the Green Manors Station led by the handsome estate of Bradley. As Clifford passed

Bradley's walled-in grounds, he glimpsed an unmistakable feminine figure without a hat move at ease through the shrubbery, mount the steps of the terrace, and enter the house. It was Mary Regan.

So then — Mary had patched things up with Bradley after her interference in behalf of young Mrs. Hendron!

Clifford had halted. There swept upon him, overwhelmingly, a desire to see Mary face to face, to speak to her, even though he had to meet her in the house of his chief enemy. He swung open the iron gate, walked up the bricked path past a wry-faced man among the roses who gave him a swift glance of malignant hatred and to whom Clifford gave back a short nod, and rang the bell.

'I'd like to see Miss Regan,' he said to Bradley's butler, when the bell was answered.

'I'll look for her, sir,' said the butler. 'Please wait in the study, sir,' and he led Clifford into the well-remembered room.

While he waited, Clifford glanced at the bookshelves. Again he had to admit that Bradley had cleverly done this business of his metamorphosis into an unobtrusive country gentleman of some taste and culture.

The door behind him opened. Thinking that Mary Regan had entered, Clifford braced his spirit and turned. But instead of Mary, he found that before him was the wry-faced man who had glowered at him from the roses. Clifford knew the man well. He was an ex-detective of the Police Department whom years before Clifford had been instrumental in 'breaking,' and who now served Bradley in some capacity unknown to Clifford; perhaps he was no more than a pensioner.

'Well, Gratton, it's been years since I've seen you,' Clifford remarked.

There was evil triumph in the man's twisted face.

'And all those years I've been waiting my chance,' snarled Gratton with the ferocity of one who has long brooded over imagined wrongs. 'And now my chance has come! The chance to even up for what you did to me, and for what you've been doing to Bradley!'

An automatic leaped into Gratton's hand and aimed at Clifford's heart. A homicidal fury blazed in Gratton's face.

'I give you just one minute to say your prayers, Clifford, if you've got any to say,' Gratton went on — 'and then you'll be bumped off.'

'Gratton,' said Clifford, trying to speak steadily, 'this will mean the electric chair —'

'Shut up, and say your prayers!'

Clifford realized now that he was face to face with death; that any slightest move on his part would mean that Gratton's trigger finger would give the fatal twitch. There were no signs of relenting in Gratton's features, and Clifford knew that no plea could save him. The thin, twisted lips of the man silently counted off the seconds of the allotted minute; and fascinated by the sheer sudden horror of his situation, Clifford watched this weird ticking of his life away.

Then Clifford heard footsteps, and then over Gratton's shoulder he saw Bradley enter, and instantly a pistol flashed in Bradley's hand. Clifford tensed himself to meet this double death. Therefore he was astounded at the words which Bradley snapped out.

'Drop that gun, Gratton, or I'll drill you!'

Clifford then saw that Bradley's pistol was trained

on Gratton. Gratton turned his head toward his patron, and made a gruff plea.

'Aw, I got him, Chief. Let me bump—'

'Drop that gun or I'll drill you!' Bradley repeated, eyes blazing. He moved swiftly toward Gratton, left hand outstretched. 'Now give that gun to me!'

Gratton hesitated, then put his automatic in Bradley's hand.

'Now get out of here!' barked Bradley. 'And if ever again you pull a gun around here, I'm through with you!'

The man slunk away. Clifford drew a long breath.

'I suppose I owe you thanks for having saved my life, Bradley.'

'Gratton would certainly have shot. But you owe me no thanks, Clifford,' Bradley's manner had relaxed to grim ease.

'Why not? Counting only the last two affairs we've been mixed up in, I've cost you two or three hundred thousand you expected to win. I know you want me out of your way. If you had held back, Gratton would have attended to the business for you.'

'Yes — and also let me be messed up in some way in a charge for murder,' Bradley responded dryly. 'If I wanted to get rid of you by the murder route, Clifford, you'd have been out of the way long ago. A hundred dollars to a gunman would have turned that trifling trick.'

'And the gunman might have squealed,' Clifford pointed out, 'and you'd have been messed up in a murder charge just the same.'

'He'd have had no chance to squeal. The instant gunman number one had killed you, gunman number two would have killed gunman number one. You would then have been reported as having been killed

by a stray shot fired in a gang feud or a bootleggers' battle. Gunman number two, if caught, would plead that he had shot the other in self-defense; no one would have blamed him much for ridding the city of a gangster. Your death would be regarded as deplorable, but accidental; the sort of thing that is happening every day to the innocent by-stander in New York. Cheap — easy — safe. See?'

Clifford saw. Indeed, the thing could have been done exactly as Bradley had described.

'But did you ever think of this, Clifford,' Bradley continued banteringly, regarding the other with cool, penetrating, cynically smiling eyes, 'that such cheap murder, such cheap revenge, is like all other cheap goods? It doesn't give satisfaction, doesn't last long. The thing's all over in a second for the victim; he doesn't know what happened to him. Now real revenge, to be satisfying, requires that your victim shall continue to live, and suffer, and that you shall have the pleasurable consciousness of his continued suffering.'

He had spoken mockingly, but a shiver ran through Clifford at his words. Abruptly Bradley's tone changed and he eyed Clifford narrowly.

'What did you come to see me about, Clifford?'

'I didn't come to see you, Bradley. I came to see Mary Regan.'

The narrowed eyes held to Clifford's face for a long moment. Then, without a word he went out, and returned with Mary.

'A gentleman to see you, Mary,' he said, with a gesture toward Clifford.

'What is it, Mr. Clifford?' she asked calmly.

For a moment Clifford could only gaze at the cool, proud, ivory-white face of this wife of his, who was his

greatest mystery. Her black eyes returned his gaze without a quiver.

'Could I see you for a few minutes — alone?' he at length managed to ask.

Bradley spoke first. 'As far as I am concerned, yes,' and he started out.

'Don't go, Mr. Bradley,' she commanded in her self-possessed voice. 'Mr. Clifford has nothing to say to me of a private character.' Bradley turned back. 'And now, Mr. Clifford, what is it you wished to say, if you please?'

Clifford flushed with chagrin at this rebuff. But he made one more try.

'I am returning to the city by the next train. I was hoping that you were returning by the same train and that I might have your company.'

Her cool voice and cool bearing did not alter. 'Thank you. I am going back by a later train.'

At this Bradley stepped in front of Clifford, square jaw out-thrust, mocking triumph in his dark face.

'I've given you your chance, Clifford, and you've had Mary Regan's answer. Now get this: it *always* will be a later train — for you! And get this: I'll not stand for Miss Regan being eternally pestered by your undesired attentions! Certainly not in my house! Understand?'

Clifford shifted his gaze questioningly to Mary Regan. Her expression remained unchanged, and she did not speak. With a formal bow, and not another word, Clifford went out, the blood of his heart replaced with the acids of bitterness. Would he ever, ever have frank speech with Mary? — ever break through that hard, icy shell of aloofness within which she had encased herself?

CHAPTER XII

THE LOVELY SKELETON

When Clifford reached the station he saw young Richard Forsythe and Jean Fenton, his fiancée, sitting in a roadster and evidently awaiting the train. Clifford remained apart and cautiously studied these two figures in the unfolding drama whose beginning Mrs. Forsythe had related to him.

Unquestionably the pair were profoundly in love; every glance, every gesture showed that. Clifford studied the two carefully. Again he had the impression that young Forsythe, who was about twenty-three, was a sensitive, highly strung individual, who even in the company of his fiancée could not banish the air of being under a great strain. Jean Fenton, despite her unusual beauty, and despite her topmost social position and her being the sole heir of the stern Henry K. Fenton of the great Fenton Holdings Corporation — Jean Fenton was unspoiled, simple, sincere. The finest kind of a girl, a girl with ideals, unless Clifford estimated her all wrong.

No wonder the Forsythes didn't want that story in the family closet to get to Jean Fenton!

On the ride back to the city, Clifford rehearsed and dissected the ancient story which had been told him in Mrs. Forsythe's sitting-room. The other girl's name was Lolette Morgan; she belonged to Broadway, and a year or two back young Dick Forsythe had come under her spell. Just how far the affair had gone, Clifford had not been told; but the young man had written Lolette Morgan most ardent letters — this

he admitted — and Lolette Morgan, with an eye to the future, had carefully preserved these missives. The now regretted romance was still a secret, and it would remain such if Lolette were paid an adequate price for silence and the letters. Otherwise, there would be a breach of promise suit — and a scandal. And there would undoubtedly be an ending of the engagement to Jean Fenton, and an end to the great plan whereby young Forsythe was to come into the Fenton firm and under the business tutelage of the rigid, severely honorable Mr. Fenton.

The Forsythes had put this matter of negotiating for the letters in the hands of Bradley, he being a neighbor, and by repute a discreet and most able detective. Their offer, made through Bradley, had risen to one hundred thousand dollars. But thus far Bradley had secured no results. He had reported to them that Miss Morgan seemed indifferent to this offer, and would make no counter-proposition of her own. Therefore in their desperation they had called in Clifford.

Clifford's face became grim. The situation was tailor-made to fit Bradley's private business devices: his immensely profitable practice of minting into gold the indiscretions, the secret follies, of the rich. In its essentials the whole situation, as Clifford now visioned it, was thoroughly typical of Bradley. Undoubtedly Bradley was in collusion with this Lolette Morgan; undoubtedly she was acting under his orders; and undoubtedly Bradley, unless checked, would bleed the Forsythes white before he was done with them.

By the time Clifford's train drew into the Pennsylvania Station he had decided upon his first step. He would see Lolette Morgan himself — see her at once —

size her up — sound her out. Of course Bradley would learn of this action; even if the girl did not tell, which of course she would, Bradley would know of the visit through his underlings who watched Clifford's every open move.

At six o'clock that same evening, by appointment, Clifford was shown by a smartly dressed mulatto maid into Lolette Morgan's softly lighted sitting-room. Miss Morgan kept him waiting several minutes, and Clifford used the time to make mental notes of the apartment and its mistress. The room and all he could see of the apartment told him that a decorator had been turned loose here with just one order, to secure easeful luxury. The whole place exhaled a rather too sweetly sweet perfume which Clifford could not identify; perhaps it was Lolette's own personal compound. All this perfumed luxury meant money — much money.

Clifford knew a little of Lolette Morgan by reputation, and had occasionally seen her in the smartest restaurants and in midnight dance clubs. She had been a modiste's model at forty dollars a week until she had graduated into one of Mr. Ziegfeld's productions as a show girl at one hundred dollars a week, from whence she had graduated into this apartment and, he understood, a Rolls-Royce with a chauffeur. Her bare living expenses, Clifford estimated, must be somewhere between forty and fifty thousand a year.

Presently Lolette came in, a slight, graceful, dainty figure, not one bit of hardness or coarseness in face or manner. She laid a soft slender hand in that of Clifford, who had risen at her entrance.

'Mr. Clifford, is it not?' she inquired pleasantly. 'You wanted to see me, I believe. But let's sit down.'

And after they were both in the embrace of soft upholstery: 'Just what did you wish to see me about, Mr. Clifford?'

Clifford had decided that diplomatic approach would be wasted effort. So he came straight to the point.

'About a certain affair between you and a very young man by the name of Richard Forsythe.'

'Oh, you mean Dicky Forsythe!' She smiled. 'Rather a nice boy, Dicky. But I thought Mr. Bradley was representing him and his mother?'

'I also am representing them. They informed me, Miss Morgan, that you have in your possession letters addressed by young Forsythe to you.'

'Yes, I have several such letters.'

'Incriminating letters, I was told they were.'

'Oh, no, Mr. Clifford — not incriminating!' she protested prettily.

'Well, then — let's say compromising.'

'No, not compromising, please. Shall we say, instead, committing? Dicky committed himself pretty far, Mr. Clifford.'

There was a moment's pause.

Clifford realized that there was no fool's brain behind that pretty face. There was a keen, calculating brain that disguised and prettified itself in soft, appealing manners. And he realized how easily a boy of twenty-one or two could have been led into rapturous folly by this wise, wise bit of prettiness who in the matter of years was perhaps five years his senior, and who in the matter of shrewd worldliness out-aged young Forsythe by a hundred. When he thought of the clean, sincere Jean Fenton, and compared her to this hothouse, perfumed gold-digger — yes, that was all she was, a gold-digger — Clifford grew sick at heart.

'All right — let's say committing letters,' Clifford agreed. 'The Forsythes want those letters back. They told me they had raised their offer for them to one hundred thousand.'

'A hundred thousand — that's not a very interesting sum, Mr. Clifford, do you think?'

'Then what to you would seem an interesting sum?' Clifford had no intention of paying a hundred thousand, or any small fraction of it. He was merely making talk while he studied Lolette Morgan.

'How very sordid and business-like you are!' she pouted prettily.

'This is a very business-like matter,' he responded bluntly. 'Will you be so kind as to name your figure?'

She studied her rings for a moment, diamonds and one splendid ruby, then lifted her blue eyes pleasantly to his.

'I don't think there will be any figure, Mr. Clifford,' she said soberly. 'I'm getting rather — well, rather tired of the sort of life I've had to lead. I'd like to settle down. As I told you, Dicky's a mighty nice boy, and I like him a lot. And as I told you, he's asked me to marry him.'

'Then marriage is what you want?'

'Dicky is nice, and I like him,' was her response.

'Then I'm to understand that the proposition is either marriage, or a suit for a big sum for breach of promise, with lots of publicity and lots of scandal? That's your real position, Miss Morgan, is it not?'

To this she made no reply, merely sat twisting her rings. But Clifford, gazing at her, understood. She was playing the game according to Bradley's instructions: taking a position that would force the uttermost possible dollar out of the Forsythes.

'I hope you won't think me rude, Mr. Clifford,' she said apologetically after a moment, 'but if that is all there is to be said, I hope you'll excuse me. I have a dinner engagement and must dress for it.'

Clifford rose and bowed formally.

'Pardon me,' he said, 'for having encroached upon the time of another man.'

'Oh, but it's not a man,' she corrected in her bright tone. 'I'm dining with a woman friend.'

She herself let him out and bid him a pleasant good-bye. Clifford went away, wholly satisfied. He believed he had learned a great deal. And he had developed a plan — at least the possibility of a plan.

Before going to Lolette Morgan's apartment, Clifford had made by telephone a dinner engagement with his old friend Detective Sergeant Jimmie Kelly, of the Police Department, to whom he had given much official credit in past cases, and who was always eager to give Clifford assistance in return for these favors. By the time the two finished their dinner in the grill of the Grantham Hotel, Clifford had given his friend an outline of the Forsythe affair, as far as he knew it, and of his surmises concerning Bradley's hidden part in it.

'And so,' commented Jimmie Kelly, 'you're out once more to block Bradley's game, and get Bradley with the goods on?'

'I certainly am — if the thing can be done. And I think it can.'

'Just how, Bob?'

'By breaking Bradley's weakest link. No, by using it.'

'Bradley's weakest link? He doesn't usually have one. What, or who, or where is this weak link?'

'Lolette Morgan. You know her?'

'Sure. At least I've been seeing her and her friends these last few years around various palaces of jazz. Go ahead — shoot the whole works.'

'The idea came to me while I was pretending to talk business to her late this afternoon, but was really studying her and her apartment. Lolette Morgan has been living, I understand, as she's now living, for the last few years — the gay and giddy life, with a fortune to spend each year. Now you know and I know, Jimmie, that in this little town of New York no woman of such a type is likely to keep up such a pace for five years without getting mixed in some shady deals, perhaps some mighty crooked deals. Their temptation is too great, they have too great opportunities — and they always need money, and sometimes need it desperately.'

'I see what you're driving at. You think there may be something in her past that can be pinned on Lolette Morgan?'

'Yes. In this affair of the Forsythe family skeleton, she's the charming skeleton, and though she's taking orders strictly from Bradley, yet Bradley has got to operate through her. Therefore she knows Bradley's game, deals his cards for him. Now I don't want her. I want Bradley. But if I could get the goods on her in some very crooked deal — or make her believe I had the goods — I could frighten her so badly that, to save herself, she'd tell all she knows. Rather, she'd play through this game as my tool instead of Bradley's and she'd arrange for me to land on Bradley at the precise second when he'll be caught guilty in the act. I don't know what the exact business will be, for I don't yet know the inside details of Bradley's game. But you get the idea?'

'Surest thing you know: the double-cross applied to

a professional double-crosser. Grand little idea — if it works.'

'Now right here is where you can help me out, Jimmie,' Clifford continued. 'Help dig up the record of Lolette Morgan — find if there are any spots in it that she'd rather give her life than have exposed. I know it sounds like dirty tactics to use on a woman — but any tactics are justifiable when you consider what she and Bradley are trying to put over. How about it, Jimmie?'

'Of course I'll help. Perhaps I can get a leave from the Chief, or get a special assignment for confidential work. And I know some of the other boys will be glad to help out, too.'

'Great, Jimmie — great!'

'All right, then — I'll get on the job, and I'll keep in touch with you. And now I must be on my way. There was a Wop wedding down on Prince Street last night, and I'm helping try to find out who stuck the knife into the groom as a wedding present. So-long.'

Clifford finished his cigar, then went upstairs. As he passed the wide doorway of the main dining-room he casually glanced in, then checked himself short at what he saw. At a table just within, facing him, Mary Regan was having dinner with a woman whose back had hints of vague familiarity. Of course he had no reason to be surprised at seeing Mary here, since the Grantham Hotel was her home — but that hot surging, which was a mixture of denied love, wrath, and baffling mystery, which always flooded him at sight of her, now again tinglingly possessed him.

Mary saw him in the doorway, and gave him her cold, forbidding stare. Her companion saw the look and turned in its direction. Clifford then saw that the other woman was Lolette Morgan.

Miss Morgan arose and came swiftly toward him with a gay smile. 'Mr. Clifford!' she cried. 'Again we meet! Come — you must sit at our table for a while.'

She caught his hand and led him, not unwilling, to where Mary sat.

'Miss Regan, this is that very, very great detective I was telling you about,' she said in her liveliest, prettiest manner, beneath which Clifford sensed mockery. 'And, Mr. Clifford, this is Miss Regan, the friend I told you I was to have dinner with. A new friend, and I am very jealous of her because she is so very, very handsome.'

'I have already met Miss Regan,' Clifford said stiffly.

'And I Mr. Clifford,' Mary stiffly replied.

'Ah, you know each other and don't like each other!' A bit of the devil flickered in Lolette's eyes. 'Beautiful!' she exclaimed. 'Beautiful! What a good situation! Since you don't like each other, then for punishment you shall talk to each other!'

Instantly she had fluttered away and was chattering with friends at another table. Clifford hesitated a moment, then sat down in her chair, eyes into Mary's eyes. He forced his words out by sheer physical effort, and those first words were a vague expression of the hunger of his foiled but persisting love.

'Mary — haven't you yet got anything to tell me?'

Her voice was frigid, distant, self-possessed, as always.

'Nothing. Except to tell you that there is nothing to tell you.'

'But later — won't there be something?'

'Later there will be the same.'

The sudden flare-up of his love swiftly receded at

her indifferent finality. Wrath and scorn flamed up in love's place.

'So — after defying Bradley in the affair of that young Mrs. Hendron, you are again working for Bradley, helping put things across!'

'For example, helping him put what across?'

'For example, helping him in the matter of the young woman whose chair I am now occupying. Don't you realize that I know that this meeting between you two is a business meeting, with you as Bradley's agent?'

'Would it be impertinent in me to ask what you think I, as Mr. Bradley's agent, am trying to put over with Miss Morgan?'

There was no reason why he should not answer. She knew all that he knew, and knew more, and knew that he knew. So he fairly spat it at her.

'Helping to fleece that young Dick Forsythe and his mother! Holding them up to the very limit of what they can be made to pay!'

She made no response to this. His scorching words continued.

'In the case of that young Mrs. Hendron you declared to me and to Bradley that you would have no hand in helping to hold up a woman or ruin a woman's reputation. Evidently your noble scruples do not apply to a man! And most evidently not to young Forsythe!'

Her gaze and her voice did not waver.

'Mr. Clifford,' she said, with her icy, remote quiet, 'are you going to leave this table? Or are you going to oblige me to leave it?'

He got up, all fiery within, and abruptly turned away. As he went out he thought he heard the gay, silvery, mocking laugh of Lolette Morgan come floating after him.

CHAPTER XIII

A CHARMING LADY'S PAST

THE week that followed, Clifford, with the help of Jimmie Kelly, spent in a close study of Lolette Morgan's past life and her present friends. Everywhere there were suspicions, hints, but not a definite clue was found to dark chapters of the sort that Lolette would shiveringly pay any price to keep unpublished. Nonetheless, Clifford clung doggedly to his belief that the kind of fact he needed would be uncovered; and he became more and more convinced that he was groping his way into the heart of a typical Bradley situation.

And while he studied Lolette Morgan he also tried to watch Mary Regan. He made it his practice to have as many of his meals as possible at the Grantham; and here he several times saw Lolette and Mary together. Lolette, when she saw him, invariably flashed at him her pretty smile of mocking friendliness. Mary ignored him. His soul continued bitter as before: Mary with Bradley and this Lolette Morgan in such a game for collecting folly's gold!

Once again what was a constant motive with him flamed up into a dominant determination: he would find some way to check Mary, despite her will, from involving herself criminally in this affair. If only he caught Bradley, that would automatically end her partnership with him. He simply had to get Bradley!

Yes, he simply had to get Bradley! — if for no other reason than to save Mary from herself.

More and more, as the days passed, did Clifford's

sympathy go out to that fine-eyed Jean Fenton and to the sensitive Dick Forsythe. The young man had been a fool, to be sure; but what impressionable young fellow with money might not have been a fool with such a girl as Lolette Morgan? Certainly Dick Forsythe was now repentant enough, and Clifford clearly understood that it was not so much fear of Jean that had kept Dick from confessing his folly to her as it was fear of her stern father. It was a bad piece of business all around. Whether Dick Forsythe ever confessed or not was none of Clifford's business, but most decidedly Lolette Morgan had to be eliminated and silenced.

Three times during that week of intense scrutiny of all that pertained to Lolette Morgan, Dick Forsythe came into Clifford's office and asked for news. Clifford did not think it wise to tell the young man that the present plan was to free him of both Miss Morgan and Bradley in one *coup*, so Clifford's replies were indefinite but hopeful. The young man seemed to be close to the breaking point under the strain. Despite Lolette's indifference in the matter when with Clifford, Forsythe reported on his third visit that extreme pressure had been exercised by her upon him. Evidently Lolette was in need of immediate money for running expenses, for she had demanded this necessary money as payment on account while negotiations were pending. He had given her two thousand in cash — she insisted on cash — and unless the affair were settled soon he knew he'd have to make a further preliminary payment.

Clifford rebuked the young man for this action, but Forsythe returned that no other endurable course had been open to him. If he had not paid, some slight hint of the situation would have been conveyed at once to

Jean Fenton. The mere thought of that he could not endure!

When he came in two days later, just after luncheon, Clifford had more positive hope for him, though Clifford did not tell the fact upon which this hope was based: that he and Jimmie Kelly at last had come upon a real clue which might very shortly be developed into a lever to be used upon Lolette Morgan. Young Forsythe was vastly relieved and in his gratitude he drew out his check-book.

'Mother reminded me to-day that we haven't paid you anything yet, Mr. Clifford. While I have the money I'd like to pay you something upon account of your fee — if you don't mind.'

'Certainly. Though it's not necessary.'

'I don't know what your bill will be, but will a thousand on account be enough?'

'Perfectly satisfactory.'

Forsythe wrote his check for one thousand dollars, handed it to Clifford, saying apologetically, 'I hope you won't mind my asking for a receipt — I've been getting so horribly messed up in my accounts.'

'A receipt — certainly.'

As Clifford wrote the receipt for one thousand dollars, young Forsythe rose, in the restless manner which had characterized him since Clifford had first met him, walked to the window, gazed nervously out, then turned about, remaining where he was, the window at his back.

'There's just a little favor I'd like to ask you, Mr. Clifford,' he said in his strained, apologetic manner. 'I've been drawing so many checks this month, and upset the way I've been — well, I've kept no proper record of what I've checked out. I'd like to know just where I stand when I get my regular monthly state-

ment from my bank. This is the twenty-ninth, and it is now half-past two. If you could deposit my check this afternoon, it would go through and be included in the statement I get on the first. If you could hurry the check over, I'd be ever so much obliged.'

'That's a favor easily granted,' said Clifford, glancing at the face of the check, then turning it face downward and reaching for his pen. 'There's your receipt.'

Forsythe pocketed it. 'I know it seems foolish —'

'Not at all,' returned Clifford, his pen poised. 'From what you and your mother have told me, it's high time you were making an effort to keep your finances straight. That is certainly one thing you'll have to do if you are to succeed in business with your intended father-in-law.'

Just then the door to Clifford's outer office opened and his secretary appeared.

'Mrs. Forsythe has been making inquiries on the wire for some time, Mr. Clifford,' she announced, 'and she now insists on speaking to you.'

'Switch her on, Miss Jameson; and I'll talk to her.'

'I can't. She's on the booth wire, in my room.'

'Excuse me a moment,' Clifford said to his young client and went out. After two or three minutes he was back again. 'Your mother was unnecessarily wrought up over the delay in affairs. I calmed her down as much as I could.'

Clifford sat down again at his desk and endorsed the check to his bank and slipped it into his bankbook. 'I'll have Miss Jameson get that over before my bank closes. And now, Mr. Forsythe, if you'll only keep your nerve for a few more days, I'm sure your worries will all be over.'

Forsythe expressed his agitated gratitude, then went out.

For the next four days Clifford did not come to his office. He did not have the time. For eighteen hours out of the twenty-four he and Jimmie Kelly were following up that clue, which, if fully uncovered and proved, would give him the desired hold upon Lolette Morgan. The work was difficult, intricate, requiring all his patience, his caution, his intuitive and deductive powers, and his all of determined purpose. But his hunch had been right. On the afternoon of the fourth day the elusive clue was a proven fact.

On that fourth day Clifford did manage to get to his office for a few minutes around five o'clock. He found there an appealing note from young Forsythe who had called in the course of the morning. The note begged for quick relief; it said that the pressure had become so unbearable that he was being compelled to make Miss Morgan a further payment, this time ten thousand dollars; and he was drawing the money from his bank and taking it over to her.

As Clifford tore up the note, he silently cursed young Forsythe for this unnecessary payment. But then, Forsythe was plainly in a panic — and then it came to Clifford that this payment might fit into his plan, provided Miss Morgan still had the money.

At half-past six, by appointment, Clifford was a second time in the sitting-room of Lolette Morgan. She entered, as dainty a figure as ever, and came to him smilingly, her hand outstretched.

'Mr. Clifford!' she exclaimed in her birdlike voice. 'So gracious of you to call on poor me so soon again!'

He took the soft little hand.

'I'm of the opinion, Miss Morgan,' he said, 'that after we're through talking you won't care to shake hands again, or have me call again.'

'So! How terrible you sound! But let's sit down.'

And after they were seated: 'Now, Mr. Clifford, please, what makes you look so — so frowny?'

'I'm here on that Forsythe matter, as you may have imagined.'

'Yes?'

'I'll come straight to the point, make it all as short as possible, for this visit isn't going to be exactly pleasant for either of us.' There was now the quiet but harsh driving power of accusation in Clifford's voice. 'In the first place, Miss Morgan, I've learned that you are working with Mr. Bradley in this Forsythe affair, that you do just what he orders you to do, that you are being used by him to bleed the Forsythes to death!'

The pretty face had during these words become non-committal, defiant.

'Well?'

'In the second place, Miss Morgan,' the driving tone continued, 'from now on you are not working with Mr. Bradley. You are working with me.'

'So! And please, Mr. Clifford, why should I work with you?'

'I told you I would make it short. You remember Mr. Philip Harrison?'

'What if I do?' she demanded.

'Just this, Miss Morgan. Over a year ago Mr. Harrison had stolen from him a pearl necklace and other jewels, valued at fifty thousand dollars, belonging to his wife. You were in his company at the time of the theft. The matter was never cleared up. It's cleared up now, Miss Morgan. You are the thief!'

She shrank away from him. Her pretty mouth fell twitchingly open.

'You — you lie!' she breathed.

'You are the thief!' he drove at her. 'I have the evidence!'

She had regained control of herself. She now came defiantly to her feet and glared at him.

'You lie! You lie! You lie!'

'I told you I had evidence. I shall show you part of it.' Clifford stepped to the hall door and opened it. 'Bring him in, Jimmie,' he called.

Propelled by Jimmie Kelly there entered a smartly dressed man of perhaps thirty, whose smartness was distinctively of Broadway derivation. On his handsome features was a trapped, lowering look.

'You — you — Jack Bantry!' Lolette Morgan gasped at sight of the man.

'You guessed it the first time!' he sneered at her.

'I believe you were formerly engaged to Mr. Bantry?' inquired Clifford.

'But, thank God, not now!' she breathed.

'And in those days,' continued Clifford, 'you and Mr. Bantry were — ah — shall we say companions, partners? — in several dubious little enterprises. Mr. Bantry, having been thrown over, jilted, by you, doesn't exactly feel cordial toward you any more, and has told us about those Harrison pearls. You might repeat to Miss Morgan, Bantry, what you've said to us.'

'I told you I'd get even with you, Lolette!' Bantry flung at her. 'But I wouldn't have done this if these dicks hadn't got the goods on me — and promised to make things easy for me if I'd come through. Yes, I told them you did it, and how you did it — a doped drink. And I told them I was with you at the time, and helped you get rid of the stuff.'

'You — you rat!' Lolette flamed at him.

'I'd have stuck by you, if you'd stuck by me,' Bantry retorted.

Lolette turned upon Clifford. 'He's lying!' she cried furiously. 'It's all lies — lies! I didn't do it!'

'Oh, yes, you did, Miss Morgan,' Clifford assured her. 'The case against you isn't based solely upon this witness. There is other evidence. We've got you hard and tight.'

Fear succeeded the fury in her face. 'I — I tell you I didn't do it!' she breathed.

'There's no use saying that, Miss Morgan. Better save all your energy for the consideration of your present situation. There are just two possible propositions before you.'

'What — what are they?'

'The first is, you are facing a certain and a long term in the penitentiary for that Harrison jewel theft. What you may get through Bradley won't be much of a compensation for prison walls. And your looks, your friends, everything that now gives you pleasure, will be gone when you come back. Just think that over.'

She considered a moment. 'And — and the other proposition?'

'That you join with me against Bradley; help me in everything I ask. If you do this, you escape the penitentiary. The case will never be pressed, for I guarantee to find and restore the pearls or else return their full value in money. Now which is it to be: penitentiary — or help me?'

She was silent a long space. Then she shrugged her shoulders hopelessly.

'I didn't do it,' she persisted wearily. 'But — what can I do? All right. I'm with you.'

Clifford turned to Jimmie Kelly.

'I guess that'll be all we'll need of you and Bantry, Jimmie. But better keep him locked up until you hear from me. So-long.'

The next moment Lolette and Clifford were alone and seated face to face. Under Clifford's pressing

questions she admitted everything. Yes, she was doing everything strictly according to Bradley's orders; yes, their joint plan had been to boost the price for the letters to the highest possible peak, he to keep reporting to the Forsythes that she was still unwilling to settle unless upon much better terms; and pending these negotiations she was to collect on the side such small hush-money as she could squeeze out of young Forsythe — said incidental sums to be reported to Bradley and turned over to him for division.

'Now I hope that's all you want from me,' she said sullenly when her confession was ended.

'Not by a lot! So far I've had only words from you. Next comes some action. Let me think.'

After a minute he asked sharply:

'Mr. Forsythe gave you this morning ten thousand dollars in cash. You still have it? — and here?'

'Yes. It's in my wall safe.'

'In what form is it?'

'Ten one-thousand-dollar bills.'

'Of course you were to report and turn over this money to Bradley. Have you yet done so?'

'I tried to, but Mr. Bradley didn't come in from Green Manors to-day.'

'Good! And you have young Forsythe's letters here?'

'They are also in my wall safe.'

'You and I have a busy night ahead, Miss Morgan!' Clifford exclaimed with suppressed excitement. 'Here's what we'll do. First, you'll telephone Bradley at his Green Manors home that you have something of immediate importance to deliver to him in person and that you'll be out on the train which reaches Green Manors at nine this evening, but he needn't bother to meet you. I'll dope the message out for you and stand

over you while you telephone to see that you don't tip him off or double-cross me in any way.'

'As if I'd be fool enough to take any such chance,' she returned sulkily.

'We'll have a bite of supper brought in here,' Clifford went on. 'I'm sorry to intrude, but you're not to be out of my sight until this is all cleared up. Here's the rest of the plan as far as it concerns you. I'll mark each of those thousand-dollar bills. We'll ride out to Green Manors on the same train, but we'll seem strangers. At Green Manors I'll get the local chief of police and one of his men to help me out. You'll time your arrival at Bradley's home to suit my schedule. You then get Bradley into his study — he'll naturally take you there, anyhow, for it's the most private room in the house — and you then pass him the money, making certain leading remarks which I shall outline to you later and which will necessitate definite replies from him. The police and I will see and overhear all, and the second the marked money is on Bradley, we'll jump him and have him for fair. Is that all clear to you?'

'Perfectly clear.'

'And if in any way you should try to double-cross me,' Clifford reminded her, 'remember that the penitentiary will be waiting for you.'

'Having gone this far, why should I try to double-cross you?' the sullen girl demanded.

'All right, just so we understand each other. And now for the money. Also the letters, which I'd better take care of.'

A minute later, the flaming letters of Forsythe's folly in his pocket, Clifford was exultantly marking the ten one-thousand-dollar bills.

CHAPTER XIV

SCRAMBLED EVIDENCE

At half-past nine Clifford, with the two Green Manors officers he had enlisted, crouched on that little balcony with the French windows that clung to Bradley's study. He was just where he had crouched on another night after Mary Regan had accidentally revealed to him the secret of those windows, a hidden push-button in the casement which released the lock of the windows and permitted them to swing noiselessly open. These windows, thus released, were now opened a bare half-inch, so that voices would carry out into the balcony, and a curtain had been the least bit disarranged so that those on the balcony could see within.

Thus far Bradley and Miss Morgan had not entered the study. Clifford's excitement was high, but not high enough to prevent his mind going, while he waited, to two other problems which had developed since he had left Lolette Morgan's apartment. One of these problems was Mary Regan. Mary had come from the city on the same train, though she had not appeared to notice either him or Lolette. Was Mary still shadowing him in Bradley's interest? Had she somehow learned something of the arrangement between him and Lolette and had she come to Green Manors to warn Bradley?

The second problem was a thought, a question: Was he not, in what he planned to do, violating that code of professional ethics which requires that all

communications to a professional man from his client be regarded as secret and sacred? Did not his plan for the exposing of Bradley lead almost of necessity to the exposing of the skeleton the Forsythes were so desperately trying to keep hidden?

Perhaps so. But then, so Clifford comforted his conscience, if he did not expose Bradley, Bradley would bleed the Forsythes through all their lives and in the end would doubtless expose them just the same. As Clifford had worked the case out, he had saved the Forsythes their fortune; he had the letters safe for them; and since he had the original letters, even if scandal should start, it could never attain the substantiality of proven fact. Yes, his way guaranteed the Forsythes the minimum of loss and shame.

After a wait which seemed an hour to Clifford, but which in reality was but a few minutes, Lolette Morgan entered the study followed by Bradley who wore a dinner jacket. Clifford tensed at the nearing climax of the drama, and silently prodded his two companions to alert attention.

'This is the best place for our talk, Miss Morgan,' Bradley's low-pitched voice came out to Clifford. The two sat down. 'Everything going according to our plan?'

'Yes.'

'Good. And you've still got the nerve to stick it out?'

'Of course. But how much longer do you think I'll have to wait? I need money, you know — and lots of it.'

'You'll get money, and lots of it. You'll wait until the offer rises to perhaps three or four times its present size. Worth your waiting a little longer, isn't it, and getting several times to-day's price?'

'Of course, Mr. Bradley — if you're sure Dick Forsythe will pay.'

'Of course he'll pay,' Bradley returned contemptuously. 'He's been a fool, hasn't he? Fools have always got to pay for their folly — and pay the limit! Just remember that, and you'll not worry!'

Bradley allowed a second to pass for his emphatic encouragement to have its full effect upon his partner. Then he said:

'You 'phoned that you had something of importance to tell me. What is it?'

'Dick Forsythe was in to see me to-day. I waited all day, trying to get you at your office, but since you were not in, and this seemed of immediate importance, I thought I'd better —'

'Yes, yes, I understand why you're here,' he interrupted impatiently. 'But the results, Miss Morgan. Any money?'

'Yes. Also a report.'

'Let's have the money first. The report can wait.'

Lolette Morgan opened her bag and handed him a folded packet of bills.

'Ah,' exclaimed Bradley in a pleased voice, 'all these little extra payments on account are just so much velvet. You're doing very well, Miss Morgan.'

'Count it,' she said. 'There should be ten of them.'

Bradley shifted his position to get a better light. Clifford saw him count the money, though Bradley's shadow fell across the bills.

'Ten is correct, Miss Morgan,' he announced, refolding the bills and slipping them into the inner pocket of his dinner jacket. 'And now the report —'

It was at this moment that Clifford, followed by the two officers, burst through the French windows. Clifford had out his automatic and it was trained on his old enemy.

'Stick 'em up, Bradley!' Clifford ordered.

Bradley had come lurching to his feet. He regarded Clifford with black fury.

'What the hell's this mean?' he demanded.

'It means that at last I've got you, Bradley! Got you in the very act of pulling one of your old-time tricks!'

'Got me, have you! Well, what for?'

'Blackmail — extortion — conspiracy against your own client! But we'll let the law frame the exact charge. The main thing is that this time I've got you!'

'It's all a lie!' declared Bradley. 'Miss Morgan and I were just talking over an ordinary small business matter.'

'Old stuff, Bradley! That won't get you anywhere this time!'

And then Clifford became aware that Mary Regan was in the room. She must have glided silently in through the door at about the time of his rush through the French windows. Upon her Clifford turned in his exultant triumph.

'I've blocked your partner's game, Miss Regan!' he cried. 'And I've blocked you from helping — just as I intended doing! I've got Bradley this time — got him with marked money on him!'

She was very pale, but she attempted no response. Clifford wheeled to the Green Manors police chief.

'You search him, Green,' he commanded. 'I don't want any counter-charge from him that I slipped the money into his clothes. You saw him put the money in the inside pocket of his coat. But first be sure to take his gun if he has one.'

'No, you don't!' snarled Bradley, backing away.

'Keep those hands up!' Clifford ordered. 'And stand exactly where you are!'

With a curse of hatred, Bradley obeyed. Green advanced and slapped his pockets.

'No gun,' Green announced, and then slipped a hand into the inner pocket of Bradley's coat. 'Yes, here's the money.'

'Count it,' ordered Clifford. 'There should be ten bills.'

'Ten is right,' said Green.

'Hold on to them for evidence, Green. And now, Bradley,' Clifford cried with that note of extreme triumph which can come only when success has rewarded a long and bitter and dangerous struggle — 'Now, Bradley, you've pulled your last trick! No longer are you going to feed and grow rich upon the mistakes of other people! Put the bracelets on him, Green.'

'Just a second,' said Green, who was recounting the evidence entrusted to him. 'Yes, ten is right. Ten ten-dollar bills.'

'What!' shouted Clifford.

'One hundred dollars,' said Green. 'Perhaps you'd better count it too.'

Clifford snatched the money. Green was right. There were ten crisp ten-dollar bills. For the moment Clifford was stupefied.

'As I told you, gentlemen,' sounded the even voice of Bradley, 'Miss Morgan and I were merely transacting a small matter of business of no importance. Now you have in that money the proof of my statement.'

Clifford came out of his stupor and whirled upon Lolette Morgan.

'So, after all, you did double-cross me!' he grated. 'Remember this: that Harrison charge still stands, and you'll pay for this by a long visit in the penitentiary!'

'I gave him the money exactly as I was ordered, or thought I did,' was Lolette Morgan's reply.

Clifford turned and stared at Mary Regan. She was now standing behind Bradley's desk, beside which was the little typewriter Bradley used to finger out his very private memoranda.

'So after all it was you — *you* — who somehow switched the money! My God — *you!*' He moved slowly toward her until he also was behind the desk, and his voice came out harshly straight into her face. 'How did you do it? Tell me, how did you do it?'

But before she could make an answer, even had she been minded to reply, there was the sound of hurrying footsteps without, and then into the study came Dick Forsythe and behind him his mother. The young man was ablaze with anger, and he made straight for the desk behind which Clifford was standing. At his approach Mary Regan moved away.

'You — you —' Forsythe gasped in choking rage, glaring at Clifford.

'Now what in thunder is this?' demanded Clifford, further astounded at this second unexpected twist.

'I've stood all I can stand — all I will stand!' cried Dick Forsythe in wild desperation. 'It's been enough to be bled by other persons — but to have you — whom I trusted and in whom I had confidence — to have you also bleed me — that's altogether too much! I've reached the limit! I won't stand for it! I won't —'

'Listen!' Clifford harshly ordered. That rule of professional ethics which requires silence regarding a client's affairs was at this moment swept out of existence as far as Clifford was concerned. 'I want to get this thing straight from the very beginning. You and your mother told me that a year or two ago you had had a very ardent love affair with Miss Lolette Mor-

gan of Broadway, now standing over there by the fireplace. The usual Broadway love affair, though you managed to keep it secret. You and your mother told me —'

'That has nothing at all to do with what you've done!' young Forsythe interrupted. 'The point is —'

'It has everything to do with whatever your point may be!' Clifford sternly cut in. 'You have no point, except as it grows out of your own situation and my connection with that situation! So we'll first get down the facts of your situation. You and your mother told me that there were a lot of passionate letters such as foolish young men write their Broadway sweethearts, and that Lolette Morgan here, since you had turned her down in order to marry another girl, was trying to hold you up for a very large sum for the return of those letters under threat of creating a scandal by making known your Broadway liaison. You were in a tight situation, a dirty situation, if Miss Jean Fenton should ever learn of it; and you and your mother asked me to handle the job for you. I've been on the job. There, that's the situation! Now, then, what's your point?'

'My point,' cried Dicky Forsythe, 'is that you knew my situation — that you took advantage of it — that you thought you could bleed me and I wouldn't dare say a word! You guessed wrong — I've stood all a human being can stand! My point, you crook, is that you're an infernal thief!'

'What's that — what's that!' exclaimed Clifford. 'Don't make any wild statement you can't prove!'

'I don't have to prove it,' said Forsythe. 'You've proved it yourself! I apologize to Mr. Bradley for bringing my troubles into his house like this, but I just learned you were here. I've been after you since noon to-day — from the moment I received my bank statement.'

'Your bank statement?'

'The statement and my cancelled checks. I had nine thousand dollars less than my own figures showed. I could not understand until I came to the check for a thousand I had given you. Then I understood!'

'What about that check for a thousand?' demanded Clifford.

'Just this: it wasn't a check for a thousand. It was a check for ten thousand! You had raised it!'

Clifford stared at the maker of this preposterous accusation. 'Why, you infernal little liar!' he breathed.

'Am I? We'll see! Mr. Green, since you happen to be here, I want you to help me.' Forsythe drew out a packet of cancelled checks, selected one, and gave it to Green. 'Just show that check to Mr. Clifford. But don't let him get hold of it; he may try to destroy it. Show him the back first; see if he recognizes the endorsement.'

Green did as instructed. Clifford gazed at the endorsement. It was indubitably his own, and he so admitted.

'Now let him see the face of the check,' Forsythe ordered.

Green turned the check over. Sure enough, Clifford read ten thousand dollars. Astonishment and a vague sickening apprehension gripped him.

'And now,' continued Forsythe, 'hold it so that the light will strike the surface of the check at an angle. See those two careful almost unnoticeable abrasions where the "one" was changed to a "ten" and where the figures were altered?'

It was exactly as Forsythe had said.

'You — you forger! You check-raiser!' young Forsythe spat out at Clifford.

'There's some devilish trick here!' declared the dazed

Clifford. 'I never received any such check! My bank-account will prove that!'

Bradley now spoke up.

'That was my belief when Mr. Forsythe brought the matter to me shortly after noon to-day. I advised that, before acting, he take the precaution of making two telephone calls. He did so. The first was to your secretary. He asked Miss Jameson, just as a matter of form, if she had deposited the ten-thousand-dollar check you had given her. She said she had. He then asked the manager of your bank, in the same polite manner, if his check to you for ten thousand had gone through your account all right. The manager looked up your account, and said the ten-thousand-dollar check had been duly credited to you.'

'Coming from you, Bradley,' said Clifford, 'I know those things are just so many lies!'

'I'm not asking you to take my word, Clifford. As you know, Remington, the manager of your bank, has his summer home here at Green Manors. He is your friend, not mine. He is acquainted with your account, since he's looked it over so recently. There's the telephone. I suggest you call him up and ask him.'

Clifford sat down at the desk, and in half a minute he was putting questions at Remington. In another half-minute he hung the receiver back upon its hook. Forsythe's check for ten thousand actually had been credited to his account! He actually did have nine thousand more in the bank than he had believed!

The thing was incredible, preposterous. But there it was; it had happened. How — how had it ever been done?

'It's a trick!' Clifford declared. 'I had no hand in that!'

'You'll have a hard time proving your innocence to

any judge and jury,' said Bradley, his eyes glittering at Clifford, 'when a person of Mr. Forsythe's standing swears he gave you a check for only one thousand, and produces your receipt for that amount. And when your own secretary swears that she received from you a check for ten thousand, and when your own banker swears he credited your account with this check for ten thousand, and when this cleverly altered check, with your endorsement, is itself in evidence. Your game was all smoothly done except for one oversight; you gave a receipt for a thousand dollars, which will of course be part of the evidence. Nine thousand dollars is a very considerable amount, and forgery and check-raising are considered very serious offenses. If you care for my opinion, Clifford, I'll say you haven't got a chance. A long term in the pen — thoroughly discredited thereafter.'

Clifford sat numbed by this terrible thing which had descended so swiftly upon him. Innocent though he was, he recognized how diabolically true was Bradley's summing-up. He did not have a chance. He was trapped — finished! He would fight, of course — but already he felt prison walls inevitably closing around him.

But how — how had this swift and amazing thing come about?

He gazed at Mary Regan. Her pale face told him nothing. He gazed at Lolette Morgan. Her face also told nothing. But it prompted a question, which he asked automatically.

'How about Lolette Morgan, and her charges against Forsythe?'

'That has been settled already,' answered Bradley. 'She will remain absolutely silent concerning the affair. She is one skeleton that will remain in her closet.'

Lolette nodded in confirmation of this agreement.

Somehow the statement of these two suddenly released the paralyzed faculties of Clifford to an almost inspired activity and almost inspired clarity. He saw it now! Not the whole of it as yet, only the main idea. And he was almost stupefied anew by what he saw.

Why, the whole intricate maze of the Forsythe case, all his activities in it, had been subtly directed toward just this present situation: his having cashed a check which all testimony would declare he had raised! He was the person that every detail of this case had been aimed at! Everything besides that altered check was just elaborate lure, just camouflage for that check — the check that would send him to prison. Nine thousand was not in itself so great a sum; but represented by that falsified check, it meant destruction to him, utter ruin! He had believed he had happened upon a typical Bradley situation — and now he realized the bewildering fact that Bradley had carefully planned this typical Bradley situation with the intention that Clifford should pick it up and try to run him down. And he, Clifford, had followed the intricate trail, and now fallen into the hidden trap at the trail's end!

Clifford looked in helpless rage across at Bradley. 'I don't know just how it was all done, Bradley, but I do know that somehow you have been and are behind it all, your purpose being to get me out of your way.'

'What you think you know, Clifford, has nothing to do with the matter. But of course, as some one once said, if I remember correctly' — Bradley's steady eyes gleamed at Clifford with triumphant, vindictive meaning — 'murder is not the safest and most satisfying method for getting a person out of one's way.'

Clifford remembered. Bradley in substance had said that thing in this very room. And how Bradley

had triumphed in this safer and more satisfying method!

'Better be putting the handcuffs on him, Green,' continued Bradley. 'Mr. Forsythe makes the charge.'

Clifford, still wondering how the thing had been done, sat in grim helplessness as Green approached. He had been too thoroughly framed to waste energy at this time in defiance or raging counter-accusation for which he had no evidence. Green, with those handcuffs, represented his final doom.

And then Green paused in his tracks, for into the study glided a slight, wraith-like figure. It was Jean Fenton. She moved straight across toward Dick Forsythe. Clifford saw that her fine face was as pale as though just touched by agonizing death.

'Jean!' exclaimed the astonished Forsythe. 'Jean!'

'I've heard it all, Dick,' she gasped.

'But, Jean —'

'I learned that something was wrong,' the girl's strained, gasping voice hurried on, 'and — and I followed you here. I've been listening just outside. I — I hate to eavesdrop, but I'm glad I did. I had the right to know, and now — and now — I know all about what Mr. Bradley called the skeleton in your closet.'

'But, Jean — for God's sake — you don't understand!' Dick Forsythe cried wildly.

'Oh, yes, I do. I understand too well. I understand that you do not really belong to me. You belong to Miss Morgan there, even though you have arranged with her to keep your love affair silent. And so — and so' — she drew off her engagement ring and held it out to him — 'you will please give your ring to Miss Morgan.'

'But, Jean —' began Dick Forsythe in an agonized cry.

But just then the lights went out.

CHAPTER XV

SOME TRUTHS COME OUT

A BABEL of voices came through the darkness to Clifford, who still was sitting behind Bradley's desk. Several moments passed. Then suddenly the lights went on. Clifford noted that all eyes were drawn from him to the interrupted scene between Miss Fenton and Dick Forsythe — even those of Mary Regan, who stood just where he had last seen her.

And then Clifford's attention reverted from this interruption of Jean Fenton's tragedy to his own crushing calamity, and his eyes lowered to the desk in a tense attempt at study. He started. At his left hand was a sheet of paper. It might have been there all this time; he had not noticed. On that paper, in the small distinctive letters of Bradley's personal machine, were typewritten these words:

Memoranda Forsythe Case Upper Left-Hand Drawer

Bewildered as he was, this sheet Clifford instantly crushed and slipped into a pocket. Under cover of the scene between Miss Fenton and Dick Forsythe, which still held all eyes, he silently and swiftly drew open the upper left-hand drawer, took out a sheet of paper, closed the drawer with the same silent rapidity, slipped the sheet upon the desk, and lowered his head in his two hands above it in the attitude of a man overwhelmed by his misfortune. The sheet was covered with typed data, all done by Bradley's machine; and attached to the sheet by a wire clip was a narrow slip of paper with perforated edges. In an instant Clifford's

brain had photographed the sheet's and the slip's every fact. For a moment he was stupefied in his every faculty by the astonishing things he had read.

Then Clifford's senses came blazingly back as an electric light that has been turned on. He folded the paper, slipped it into his inner coat pocket, and went through the group in the study like a line-plunging half-back. His right hand gripped Dick Forsythe's shoulder.

'Come through, Forsythe!' he cried in a terrible voice, shaking the young man. 'Come through — for I've got your number now! I know your record since a child, you thief, you forger, you check-raiser, you —'

But he was stopped by Mrs. Forsythe, in a sudden frenzy, throwing an arm around his neck and pressing a hand over his mouth.

'Oh, good God!' she gasped in frantic pleading. 'Don't! Don't!'

Clifford broke her hold and pushed her away.

'Come through, Forsythe!' he repeated, again shaking the young man. 'Come through, you thief, you forger —'

Dick Forsythe interrupted with an agonized cry to Bradley.

'Stop him — stop him! You promised this should never be known!'

'Keep out of this, Clifford!' Bradley grated at him.

But Clifford, giving Bradley no heed, continued his shaking of Forsythe.

'Better come through, for I've got your record since you were seven up to that Mortimer check you raised!'

The young man turned eyes that were anguished upon his mother. 'Mother,' he gasped wildly, 'I simply can't stand it any longer — I can't stand it! Not with

Jean believing what she believes! And it's no use trying to keep it up. So I'm going to tell the truth!'

'No, you don't!' harshly snapped Bradley, shoving in toward Forsythe. 'Not one word, young man!'

'Keep back, Bradley!' Clifford checked him with the straight-arm of football. 'You've got no gun, I still have mine, and I'll use it if necessary! Forsythe is going to talk. Now go on, Forsythe.'

'Jean, it's not at all what you think!' Dick Forsythe began. 'You may think it's even worse — the truth — '

'Dick, if it's got to be told,' broke in his mother, 'let me tell it, since I know more about it and since I am most to blame.'

She sank into a chair, a huddled, broken woman, and sobbed into her hands. Clifford waited her words, and while waiting he could but compare this huddled, moaning figure with Mrs. Forsythe as she had been when he had first met her: disturbed, to be sure, but upheld by the dignity of old family, by the Forsythe pride.

Presently Mrs. Forsythe looked up at Jean Fenton. 'Jean,' she quavered, 'you heard something about the Forsythe family skeleton. There is a skeleton, but Miss Morgan here is not that skeleton.'

'Thanks for admitting that I have some flesh on my bones,' commented pretty Lolette Morgan.

'The real skeleton, Jean, is something very different,' Mrs. Forsythe continued. 'Mr. Clifford here has given you the outline of the truth. But blame me most, Jean — please! In the beginning and right through till now, at the end, it has been mostly my fault. I was proud, and ashamed, and frightened, and I didn't know how to handle the thing — and I see now I handled it all wrong.'

She gave a sob, swallowed gulpingly, and went on.

'As a small boy, Jean, Dick was a kleptomaniac. He wasn't consciously a thief, any more than a dog or a parrot that steals things and hides them. Perhaps if Dick's father had only lived, everything would have been different. If I had openly admitted Dick's weakness, I might have cured him as a boy, and there would have been nothing more to it. But I was horribly ashamed, it seemed a terrible disgrace, and I was afraid people would find it out. So instead of trying to cure it, I tried to hide it. The instinct grew worse as he grew older and more able to see cleverer ways to steal. Finally he got to forging and raising checks — mine and other people's. It was terrible — terrible —'

'But, Jean,' Dick Forsythe interrupted huskily, 'I've done nothing of that kind for over two years! I swear!'

'No, Jean, he hasn't!' corroborated his mother. 'Not once — not a thing! He's cured. I think he just woke up to what he was becoming and cured himself. Of course, all along I promptly made good on all the bad checks and hushed everything. Everything — except with a Mr. Mortimer. Dick had forged his name to a check for a thousand dollars. Mr. Mortimer wouldn't let me settle. He didn't need the money, and he had an old grudge, and he preferred to hold that check over us as a constant menace. Also he had learned about other checks Dick had forged or raised, and that one check would have brought out the facts about the other bad checks, and at any time he could have sent Dick to prison. I lived in constant terror of the exposure, the disgrace. Then somehow Mr. Bradley got possession of this Mortimer check and all the facts about the other checks. I finally offered Mr. Bradley fifty thousand dollars for the check and his silence. He wouldn't accept. The only terms under which he

would agree to return the check was that I was to get Dick to write compromising letters to a girl he'd pick out and —'

'You can't prove a thing against me!' Bradley cut in.

'Say, folks, right here seems the place for little Lolette Morgan to say something,' spoke up that person in an easy voice. 'I don't know who staged this show, but I wish to tell the producer and the rest of the world that the show seems suddenly to have flivvered. Such being the case, little Lolette Morgan wishes to serve notice that she is resigning her rôle of Broadway siren, home-wrecker, and blackmailer extraordinary.'

'What's that?' demanded Clifford.

'Haven't you tumbled to me yet, Mr. Clifford? Once I had a small part in a movie. The director told me to do this and to do that, and I did them, but I didn't know why I did them, or why the other people were doing the things they did, or what that show was all about. Same with this show. I was paid some money, which I needed, and was told to do this and do that, and I've done them. But I've never had an idea what this whole show was about.'

'Nor have I!' groaned Dick Forsythe. 'And I, too, was told to do this and do that!'

'Told by me,' explained his mother. 'And I got my orders from Mr. Bradley.'

'You can't prove it!' put in Bradley's harsh voice.

Clifford was still staring in amazement at Lolette Morgan. 'Well, I'll be —'

'No need to swear, or be surprised at me, Mr. Clifford,' Lolette interrupted. 'I'd have been rather a nifty little actress if only Florrie Ziegfeld hadn't kept insisting that I was worth more to him as a show girl. My chief stage-directions in this show were to string

you along with some business about a bunch of love letters, and I think you'll admit I did the job rather neatly — though I wish to say again I had no idea just why I was doing it. And now, Mr. Forsythe' — drawing a packet of money from her bag — 'here is the ten thousand you loaned me to-day for this purpose.'

'And the hundred thousand you had refused?' queried Clifford.

'I learned about that first from you. I wish I had been paid a tenth of that figure for my part in this show.'

'Miss Morgan,' slowly said Clifford, gazing at the pert, pretty little creature, 'do you know, I believe I'm beginning to be sorry for having raked up that old Harrison case and set the police after you.'

'Don't be sorry for me,' she returned. 'You were expected to find that Harrison evidence, and use it to force me to expose Mr. Bradley. That evidence was all planted by the stage director, whoever he is; not a bit of it would stand up if an actual charge were made. I know nothing at all about those Harrison jewels, nor does Jack Bantry. Jack was also just acting.

'The fact is, Mr. Clifford,' she continued, 'I'm pretty much of a fraud. I'm not exactly an angel — but then again I'm not nearly so bad as the stage director made me be. Nor, in fact,' she confessed, 'do I have as much money, or spend as much money, as you seem to think. That love-nest of an apartment you were in isn't mine; it is just a hired stage-setting and I'll be out of it to-morrow. I make my biggest money teaching dancing in a very private and exclusive way, and when I go out to public dancing places with men pupils it's on a strictly business basis of a fixed rate for my time. There now — you really know me.'

'But — but, Miss Morgan' — it was the piteously strained and pale Jean Fenton who spoke — 'Miss Morgan — those — those love letters —'

'Listen, dear,' said Lolette, 'you don't like me, but I like the looks of you an awful lot. Those terrible, terrible love letters written during a terrible, terrible love affair a year or two ago with a terrible, terrible siren of Broadway, are actually predated letters which are three or four weeks old. Before they were turned over to me, I signed a paper which released Mr. Forsythe from all liability, which paper he now probably has on his person and can show you. Further, those very tender letters are not at all tender; just affectionate enough to give me a real hold on him, say for a ten-thousand-dollar judgment if they had been real. Such as they are, they are now in Mr. Clifford's possession to be turned back to Mr. Forsythe. Further, Miss Fenton, this is the fourth time I have ever seen Mr. Forsythe and the most intimate moment of our torrid love affair was when I once shook his limp and shrinking hand. I was paid to hold those letters, and paid for the loan of a Broadway reputation that's mostly fake. There, my dear, that's all there is to the terrible scandal. And I hope you'll live happy forever after.'

Jean Fenton drew a long, quivering breath. But she neither moved nor spoke.

The mechanics of this intricate plan to exterminate him — and it would have exterminated him but for Bradley's oversight in leaving that Forsythe memorandum on his desk! — were now all clear to Clifford, except the most important of all, the check. That he still could not understand.

'Tell me, Forsythe,' he asked, 'how you managed the business of that forged or raised check?'

'It was not a forged check when you had it. It was a perfectly good check for ten thousand dollars.'

'But you gave me a check for one thousand!'

'I gave you two checks, though you did not know it. The first check was for a thousand, and for that check I took your receipt. According to a prearranged plan my mother had been steadily talking to your secretary for some time. When you had turned the thousand-dollar check face downward and prepared to endorse it, I gave a signal from your window which was instantly relayed to my mother who was waiting for it and she instantly insisted on speaking to you. While you were out of the office answering her call, I substituted a ten-thousand-dollar check which I had in readiness and took away the first check. The plan hung upon the chance that, after I had asked you to hurry the check through, and after you had once carefully examined the check, you would not reëxamine it. You did not. Those apparent alterations in the face of the check were made by me to-day after I had received the cancelled check from the bank.'

'God!' breathed Clifford.

'I did not think out that scheme,' added Forsythe. 'I did just what my mother told me I had to do.'

'And I,' explained Mrs. Forsythe, 'got those instructions from Mr. Bradley.'

Clifford turned upon Bradley, who gave back a look of lowering defiance.

'A safer and more satisfactory means of getting a man out of one's way than murder!' Clifford slowly exclaimed. 'And you almost put it over with this devilishly clever plot. And how you must want to get me! — when you turn down Mrs. Forsythe's offer of fifty thousand and instead force her and others by terror and money into unconscious or semi-conscious actions aimed at my ruin!'

Suddenly Clifford's voice snapped out exultantly. 'But you've been upset and trapped by your own plan, Bradley! Conspiracy, Bradley! Green, arrest that man on the charge of conspiracy!'

'Where's your evidence?' Bradley snapped back. 'Your witnesses?'

'I can't be a witness against him, Mr. Clifford,' put in Lolette Morgan. 'I never spoke a word in my life to Mr. Bradley before to-night. That's honest.'

'It's the same with me,' said Dick Forsythe. 'Everything from him came from my mother.'

'I at least can testify,' spoke up Mrs. Forsythe.

'One unsupported, uncorroborated witness,' snarlingly jeered Bradley, 'and that witness frightened to death for fear of the exposure of her son's crimes! There's your case, Clifford; go to it! I deny everything.'

There was, indeed, no case, Clifford perceived. The shrewdly planning Bradley had planned even against personal liability, in case of the failure of his plan.

'Green,' said Clifford, 'you and your man might as well go. There'll be no arrests to-night.'

The two officers went out. Clifford turned upon Mary Regan, who had stood a silent and motionless figure during all this scene.

'And you, too, were in this scheme!' he exclaimed bitterly. 'And I suppose you also have your part in this just as carefully alibied or unwitnessed as Bradley!'

She maintained her silence; just stared at him in cold unexpression of whatever she felt or thought. It was the sound of Jean Fenton's voice which caused him to turn again to the others.

'Dick,' she was saying tremulously, her eyes fixed searchingly into his, 'besides what you helped do

against Mr. Clifford, is there anything else except those old checks?'

'Nothing, Jean — nothing! I swear!'

'Then, Dick' — her voice was close to breaking in its throbbing happiness — 'oh, Dick — why — why didn't you come to me in the beginning and tell me? I would have understood — it would have been all right with me!'

'Jean!' he breathed, staring. 'Jean — you really care that much? You would overlook? — forgive?' And then: 'But you don't understand it all, Jean. Don't you see how I was caught, with Mr. Bradley holding that Mortimer check, able to send me to prison? — disgrace you, mother, all of us?'

'And, Jean,' Mrs. Forsythe added, 'don't you see that if we had defied Mr. Bradley and let him use that Mortimer check publicly, it would have ruined utterly all Dick's business chances with your father?'

'You and I, Mrs. Forsythe,' Bradley put in menacingly, 'will some day have another talk about that Mortimer check!'

'Is this Mortimer check,' Clifford asked young Forsythe, 'the only positive evidence against that past which you have overcome and which you wish to forget?'

'Absolutely the only evidence!' declared Dick Forsythe, and his mother echoed his cry.

Clifford drew out the narrow slip of paper which had been attached to Bradley's sheet of Forsythe memoranda.

'In that event, Miss Fenton,' he said, holding the slip out to her, 'I wish this to be my wedding present to you.'

'Why — why, Dick!' she breathed as she read it. 'Dick, look — look!'

He took the slip. Then he suddenly burst into an astounding cry of joy.

'Jean! — mother! Look — the Mortimer check!'

'What's that?' roared Bradley charging at them, to be halted again by Clifford's straight-arm.

'The Mortimer check!' repeated Dick Forsythe, in his wild joy holding it aloft so that Bradley could identify it. 'The Mortimer check!'

Bradley swore at Clifford, then demanded in choking fury: 'Say, how did you get that check?'

Clifford ignored him.

'Listen, Forsythe, and do just as I tell you. That check is for one thousand dollars, and is two years old. I'm hoping the check cost Bradley a small fortune, but we're concerned only with what may be considered its legal value. Put one thousand dollars upon Bradley's desk to cover the face value of the check, and another two hundred which will far more than cover the legal interest for two years.'

Dick Forsythe put down the money on Bradley's desk as ordered. Clifford drew out his match-box and handed it to the young man.

'Now burn that check.'

With trembling hands Dick Forsythe lighted a match and touched it to the check. The slip of paper leaped into a swift yellow flame, and the next moment that last bit of the Forsythe skeleton was only a thin wisp of black ash upon Bradley's rug.

'And now,' said Clifford, 'the past will trouble none of you, and I suggest that all three of you go home.'

But instead of obeying this final order, Jean and Dick rushed into an embrace of ecstatic relief and happiness, with Mrs. Forsythe sobbing over the pair. Then the three of them fairly flung themselves upon Clifford in their gratitude. And Clifford warmed

beneath it; he realized that he had, by some strange twist of circumstances, been instrumental in solving their great hidden problem while all the time working upon their pretended trouble. Mrs. Forsythe begged him to take the hundred thousand she had offered Bradley, but this he refused, and finally got them started out, only after he had made a promise to call upon them the following afternoon.

'By the way, Mr. Clifford,' said Dick Forsythe, halting in the doorway, an arm around Jean Fenton, 'I think I should tell you that the real money behind that ten-thousand-dollar check I gave you is Bradley's money. You've got his ten thousand in your bank.'

With that they were gone. Clifford turned to face Bradley, and was surprised to see that Mary Regan no longer stood a statued figure where she had been all evening; she must have vanished silently during the burning of the check. Only he and Bradley and Lolette remained.

'I guess that will be all for to-night, Bradley,' Clifford said with a taunting edge to his voice. 'But before I leave, I want to thank you for that ten-thousand-dollar contribution. I shall keep it, of course — but not for my personal use. I'll be greatly obliged if you will mention your favorite charity.'

'Go to hell!' choked out the now almost apoplectic Bradley.

'Don't you do it, Mr. Clifford,' advised Lolette. 'Instead, let's go to New York. Come on.'

Ten minutes later the two caught a New York train. As they moved through the coach they saw just before them Mary Regan. The next seat ahead of her was empty.

'Miss Regan!' exclaimed Lolette in her bright way, starting to turn over this second seat to face Mary.

'If you don't mind, we'll sit and chat with you on the ride into town.'

Mary's words were in response to Lolette's self-extended invitation, but her gaze was on Clifford.

'If it's all the same to you two, I prefer to ride alone.'

'Zowie — didn't she paste us one!' Lolette said to Clifford a moment later when they were seated. 'I tell you there is one lady as which has got little Lolette Morgan buffaloed for fair!'

'Why?' Clifford inquired cautiously.

'I simply can't make her!' Lolette confessed. 'Never knew her until two or three weeks ago — though I'd seen her here and there. But during these last three weeks — well, now I have the sense that, on the one hand, she's not let slip one single little thing about herself, and, on the other hand, with me not suspecting it at the time, she has pumped me and X-rayed me and this psycho-somethinged me till now she knows more about me than I know myself. Mr. Clifford, a lot of strange things happened to-night. Shall I tell you what struck me as the strangest?'

'Go on,' urged Clifford. 'What was the strangest thing that happened?'

'Mary Regan. Because she didn't happen. Not obviously, I mean. I watched her. She hardly moved, I don't believe she said a word. There are a lot of things about to-night I still don't understand, perhaps some you don't understand. But here's my hunch: of all the persons there, the one person who comes nearest to understanding everything that happened, that person is Mary Regan. There's something for you to think about.'

Clifford proceeded to think. Certainly every other mystery had been cleared up that night, except this persistent and impenetrable mystery of Mary Regan.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SUMMER WIDOW

WHAT Lolette Morgan had said kept ringing in Clifford's ears during the days that followed. But Clifford could find no solution for the puzzle of Mary Regan that Lolette had outlined, and he did not so much as hear Mary's name again mentioned until the day Mrs. Arlington called at his office.

Clifford accepted the bit of newspaper Mrs. Arlington had nervously taken from her purse, but, before reading the item she indicated, he made a swift estimate of his visitor. Mrs. Arlington was perhaps twenty-four or five, a born beauty who had always had all the beautifying advantages and embellishments that unlimited wealth can procure; a graceful, proud, spirited, willful, pleasure-loving young creature. On the whole, a spoiled darling of fortune, but with fine, sound, likable qualities: so Clifford summed her up.

'I believe when you 'phoned for this appointment, Mrs. Arlington,' he queried, 'you said Mrs. Forsythe of Green Manors recommended that you come to me? That is how you first heard of me?'

Young Mrs. Arlington moistened her lips. 'No, I was first advised to see you by an unsigned note.'

'An unsigned note!' Clifford gave an inner start. It was strange, the number of cases that had been sent to him in this anonymous fashion! 'Go on, please.'

'The note suggested also that I consult Mrs. Forsythe as to your ability and reliability. I did so, without telling her about my trouble. Both she and her son spoke of you in the highest terms; I've known them

both for a long time. And Dick Forsythe's fiancée, Jean Fenton, said the same about you. Jean and I used to be great friends, though I am three years older: great friends until Jean's father told her I was — well, a bit too gay for her. That's how I came to you, Mr. Clifford.'

'How long have you been married, Mrs. Arlington?' Clifford continued.

'Almost four years. Our fourth anniversary is just ten days off.'

'And Mr. Arlington, how old is he?'

'Twenty-eight. Just four years older than I am.'

'He's in New York?'

'He's been in New Mexico and Arizona for the last two or three months looking after mining interests. I'm one of these — these summer widows.' Then, with a swift outburst of resentment: 'And my husband might just as well have been in New Mexico all these last two years!'

Clifford regarded her intently for several moments after this flare-up.

'Mrs. Arlington, if I am to be of real service to you, you must permit some very intimate questions, and you must be very frank in your answers. Do you love your husband?'

'Of course I do! Paul is simply wonderful!'

'And does Mr. Arlington love you?'

'Of course he does! We're tremendously in love! Only — only Paul is so wrapped up in the idea of being a big success, though Heaven knows we already have money enough! He's always said he wasn't just going to be known as a rich man's son, he was going to be a big success all on his own. These last two years he's hardly had time to see me, much less go with me anywhere. And Paul is frightfully jealous! Frightfully!'

She paused for a deep, quivering breath, then continued with desperation in her voice. 'Don't you see the situation, Mr. Clifford? — how my trouble happened, and what may happen because of it? We love each other — Paul's been so busy that if I wanted company, it had to be some one else — he's terribly jealous — and now he's coming back in time for our fourth anniversary and he'll be sure to find out about my losing the ruby pendant he gave me on our first anniversary, for he'll expect me to wear it! And he'll be sure to find out just how I lost it, unless I can get it back before his return — and if he finds that out, don't you see what will happen, Mr. Clifford? Don't you see?'

Clifford gazed into the strained, appealing face, and nodded his understanding. Then he turned to the bit of newspaper she had handed him. It was part of the 'Lost and Found' column of the New York *Times*, and the item Mrs. Arlington had indicated read:

LOST — Friday night in taxi-cab between Columbus Circle and 42nd St., or in Corona Theater, pendant consisting of one large solitaire pear-shaped ruby on platinum chain set with 24 small rubies. Liberal reward for return. No questions asked. Address Ruby, X937 Times.

Clifford looked up. 'Lost on Broadway, or in a theater. That's pretty indefinite, Mrs. Arlington.'

'It wasn't lost on Broadway. It was lost twenty-five miles from Broadway. And it wasn't lost at all. It was stolen. That part is all a blind. The only true part is the description of the pendant, and the reward, and no questions asked.'

'Why did you write the advertisement in just that form?'

'So that no one but the hold-up men would understand. That advertisement was intended for the rob-

bers alone, and I put it in all the papers hoping they would see it. I understood that robbers sold what they stole to places called "fences," and that they were paid perhaps a half or a quarter of the real value of what they had stolen. I hoped they would get in touch with me, and sell to me. I would have paid them as high as ten thousand which is just what Paul paid for the pendant.'

'Did you get a response from the robbers?'

'Yes. But not from them direct. It came through Mr. Bradley.'

Clifford barely managed to keep back an exclamation.

'Just what did Mr. Bradley say?

'He said the robbers had seen the advertisement, but were afraid of being caught in a trap if they appeared openly in the matter. So they had engaged an intermediate person to approach him and authorize him to negotiate with me. He told me the robbers had said they would be glad to return the pendant, if I kept to my promise of no questions asked, and if the reward were satisfactory.'

'What reward did they consider satisfactory?'

'Mr. Bradley said the amount he had been instructed to ask for was one hundred thousand dollars in cash.'

One hundred thousand dollars — how familiar such a figure seemed! It was such amounts as this that Bradley had played for in the adroit games Clifford had blocked — and how many a game against the folly-involved and frightened rich he must have put over, and collected for, of which Clifford knew nothing! One hundred thousand dollars for the return of a stolen ten-thousand-dollar ruby!

'And I simply cannot raise one hundred thousand in cash before Paul gets back,' went on the frantic Mrs.

Arlington. 'Of course I've got very much more than that, but these days a person can be very rich and still find it hard to raise a hundred thousand in cash. And even if I could raise the amount, Paul would be sure to learn of my raising it, and he'd naturally want to know why I'd suddenly needed so large a sum in addition to my regular income which is more than I really need. And so, even if I paid, Paul would find out just what the situation was! Honestly, Mr. Clifford' — she was now unrestrainedly hysterical and her eyes were streaming — 'I didn't intend to do anything bad, and it really wasn't bad. But to Paul it will seem terrible! And when Paul learns, and having that jealous nature and that terrible temper — oh, I simply can't bear to think of what will happen, Mr. Clifford! I simply can't bear to think of it!'

Clifford managed to calm her hysteria down to tremulous, choking sobs. 'Now, Mrs. Arlington, suppose you let me have the whole story from the very start in all its details.'

She obeyed, holding back nothing. In its essentials her story was that, because of her loneliness at home, she had flung herself into some of the wilder gayeties of the rich young Long Island set around Huntington. One night after a dinner party some one had suggested that they all pile into machines and run into New York to one of the smart midnight dancing clubs. This they had done, going to The Pipes o' Pan, the smartest and most exclusive of all such clubs. Here their group had mixed with another party of friends, among whom was a Mr. Frazer. Half her dances that night were with Mr. Frazer, who was a good-looking, really charming man of perhaps thirty, with a deft knowledge of all the latest steps and an entrancing sense of dance rhythm; it had seemed that she and Mr. Frazer were

naturally mated dancing partners. Also, quite incidentally, she had seen there on her first visit the man she had later met as Mr. Bradley.

There had followed more parties at The Pipes o' Pan. On each occasion she had danced most of the dances with Mr. Frazer. He knew she was married, and always he was the courteous gentleman. Out of this dancing developed friendship; two or three times when she was in town they had lunched together. Then two or three times she had driven alone in her roadster into town at night — she had thus made the trip hundreds of times, and the thing was a commonplace to her — and she and Mr. Frazer had dined together, gone to some musical comedy, then danced at The Pipes o' Pan, after which she had driven home alone. Perhaps she had allowed herself more liberty than a married woman should have taken; but then she had been so lonely at home with not a soul to talk to except the servants, and Mr. Frazer had never presumed to venture beyond such intimacies as are permissable in friendship — and, after all, what had there been in her behavior that was really wrong? — though it may have been indiscreet.

Then came the night when the terrible thing had happened. She and Mr. Frazer had danced until almost three, and he had accompanied her to the garage where she had left her roadster. Its ignition had been giving her trouble all day; now the car was dead. The only attendant at the garage at this late hour knew nothing about cars except the washing of them; she knew nothing about batteries and wiring, and Mr. Frazer knew no more. Of course she could have gone to a hotel for the night, but Mr. Frazer had offered to get his car out of a near-by garage and drive her home. With the clear roads of three o'clock, he could have her

in her own house in less than an hour and himself in his own apartment within less than another hour. She had accepted.

They were twenty-five miles out of the city when bumps over a bit of rough going had informed them that a rear tire had gone flat. That was a mishap easily remedied, Mr. Frazer had said; for his car was equipped with wire wheels, and all that was required was the jacking-up of the car, the pulling-off of the disabled wheel, the slipping-on of the spare wheel — five minutes' work — and again on their way. Then to his momentary consternation Mr. Frazer had discovered that his jack was not in the tool cabinet; the mechanic who had overhauled his car the previous day must have forgotten to return the jack to its place.

Fortunately, so it had then seemed to them, their slight misfortune had befallen them within a hundred yards of one of those small road-houses which on Long Island seem during the summer months never entirely to fall asleep. A light was burning; they had roused the dozing proprietor, who in turn had roused a dozing mechanic from his cot in the garage and dispatched him down the road with a jack and with instructions to change the wheels. Mr. Frazer, relieved of this task, had suggested that they put the minutes of their wait to use by having a bite to eat; she was hungry, for it was then around four o'clock, and she had gladly accepted. The proprietor, with the help of his sleepy wife, had produced sandwiches which they served in a bright little room off the gloomy unlighted main dining-room, and Mr. Frazer had produced his pocket flask and prepared drinks.

Till that moment, barring the mishaps to the two cars, everything had gone quite all right. And then the thing had happened which, with varying details,

is happening seven days a week on the front pages of New York newspapers. A roaring motor had come to a grinding stop without, then into the little room had backed the frightened proprietor and his wife, and after them had come two masked bandits with alert automatics. The bandits had lined the four against the wall, had taken all of Frazer's valuables, her ruby pendant which she was wearing that night, and had cleaned out the landlord and his lady. Then one of them, who had been studying her face, had suddenly let out a gruff, ironic laugh.

'Look, Bill, if the dame ain't that Mrs. Arlington! Out for a private little spree with a gent which ain't her husband! See the drinks and the eats, Bill — great stuff these rich ladies will pull off, if they can do it on the quiet. Now I wonder, Bill — I wonder — what the dear lady's dear hubby would think if he could see what we're seein' — his wife, while he's away, havin' her little drinkin' party and so forth with a handsome gent at four A.M. in a road-house joint that's got the juicy name that the Gray Goose Inn has got! I wonder!'

They had backed out, their machines had roared away, a few minutes later Frazer's machine had come up, and fifteen minutes after that she had been in her own home. A little quiet investigation had assured her sickeningly that the ironical bandit had been quite right about the reputation of the Gray Goose Inn. The place was notorious for its scandals; many a divorce case had had the Gray Goose Inn as the setting for its damning evidence. Her own situation, innocent enough in intent, could hardly have a more compromising appearance; and her husband, if he learned of it, would believe exactly as the bandit had indicated. She simply had to get back that ruby pendant! There-

fore she had inserted that advertisement in an attempt to deal directly with the bandits. Then had come Bradley's reply to her advertisement; and after that, forwarded to her from one of the newspapers in which the advertisement had appeared, had come the unsigned note advising her to talk to Mrs. Forsythe and then see Clifford.

Clifford sat in deep thought for a long space after Mrs. Arlington had concluded the outline of her misadventure and present predicament. Then he said:

'When you saw Mr. Bradley did he say anything about what the bandits would do in case you failed to make the required payment?'

'Yes. He apologized, and said he was not speaking for himself, but was merely conveying to me the instructions given him. In case I didn't pay, the bandits were going to write my husband an anonymous letter telling him just what they saw, and referring him to the proprietor of the Gray Goose Inn and his wife as witnesses to the truth of their statement.'

'I see — keeping themselves safely out of it,' commented Clifford. 'How does Mr. Frazer take their demand? — that is, if you have told him.'

'I've told him, yes. He blames himself for the whole affair, feels almost as wretched as I do. He wants to help pay, if I decide to pay, though I doubt if he has a great deal of spare money; and he wants to help explain to my husband, if I decide to try to explain. In every way, Mr. Frazer has been simply splendid!'

'By the way, did you meet any other people new to you at The Pipes o' Pan that you remember?'

'No, none that especially stand out in my mind. Of course I was meeting a lot of new persons — Why, of course there was some one!' Mrs. Arlington interrupted herself. 'A very interesting and fine-looking

young woman of about my own age. She piqued my curiosity a lot, for I could not make her out. She was a Miss Regan — Mary, I believe her first name was.'

Clifford had to summon his greatest power of self-control at the mention of the name of his wife.

'Did you become acquainted with this Miss Regan?' he managed to ask in his professional tone.

'Yes. But not intimately. She was very reserved, and didn't say much. But I felt that she must be very clever.'

'Have you seen her recently?'

'This very morning. It so happened that we met on the street and she walked with me to this building.'

So, then, Mary was still at her old business of shadowing persons Bradley wanted watched!

'Did you tell her where you were coming? — or why?'

'No. I haven't mentioned my troubles to her in any way.'

Clifford considered for a moment. 'Mrs. Arlington, don't you think your wisest course would be to tell your husband the truth? The only real hold these bandits have upon you is your fear of your husband finding out.'

'If you knew Paul, you'd never suggest such a thing!' she cried wildly. 'He'd not believe me! The bandits would be sure to carry out their threat of giving their version of the story, and their story would be the one Paul would believe! I can't tell — I can't — I can't — I can't!'

Clifford realized that she was changeless in this attitude. 'Very well, Mrs. Arlington, I will take your case if you still desire — but only upon my own terms.'

'I'm sure I can meet your terms, Mr. Clifford,' she said eagerly. 'I will pay —'

'I'm not referring to financial terms. There'll be no difficulty about them. The terms I mean are these: you are to do everything I request without asking my reasons, and it is to be agreed that I am to have full authority to handle the case, in all its details, and without preliminary explanations to you, exactly as my judgment may decide.'

She regarded him doubtfully. She was accustomed to her own way, and it was difficult for her to yield full power to another.

'This is all so terribly, terribly important to me, Mr. Clifford — and I don't see why you should want me to trust you that far.'

'Just because I know I can't trust *you*, Mrs. Arlington,' Clifford returned. 'I know that sounds brutal. I don't doubt your essential innocence in this affair; but, pardon me, you have been extremely indiscreet. I cannot run the risk of your impulsive indiscretion further complicating this case. Therefore I must have absolute and unquestioned authority, otherwise you may take the matter elsewhere.'

'All right, I agree,' she hastily submitted.

'Then here are my first directions. You are not to see me again unless I send for you.'

'Yes, Mr. Clifford.'

'And any time you see Mr. Bradley and Mr. Frazer you are to behave exactly as before. This also applies to Miss Regan.'

'Very well.'

'At midnight to-night I shall be at The Pipes o' Pan. You also are to be there with Mr. Frazer. Your being with him will be my means of identifying him. You are not to know me, and if we should be intro-

duced I am to be a stranger you are meeting for the first time.'

To these and further instructions Mrs. Arlington agreed. After she had gone, Clifford sat for a long space gazing vacantly across his office in grim thought. So, it was on again, his old war with Bradley! And also his embittering and baffling struggle to save from her own proud perversity that enigmatic wife of his, Mary Regan!

CHAPTER XVII

THE PIPES O' PAN

At midnight Clifford, in evening clothes, was at a little table by himself in The Pipes o' Pan, making a quiet study of the place where Mrs. Arlington's predicament which might end in domestic tragedy had had its gay beginning.

The Pipes o' Pan was typical of the smarter and more exclusive dancing clubs which were born of prohibition and which are the successors on Broadway of the brilliant restaurants of a less strict era. It was a 'membership club,' thus lessening the danger of interference from police and prohibition officers — but becoming a member was a perfunctory matter requiring but a few moments if the applicant were of eligible quality. The rule was that every one brought 'their own'; but the proprietor and his underlings were ever ready to sell members 'their own' at fifteen dollars a pint, and with the ending of the transaction the management's responsibility also ended. There was a heavy cover charge; ginger ale was a dollar a bottle. The stiff tariff, together with the club secretary at the entrance, who was a discreet and courteous strong-arm man in evening attire, very effectively excluded undesirable applicants.

Clifford noted that the whole place was in extremely good taste, as such places go: with a bizarre and striking color scheme that was Americanized Russian, softly illumined by lights that were misted by golden-tinted silken gauze. The elect in such matters knew that The Pipes o' Pan orchestra played the most cap-

tivating jazz music in New York City — music that put resistless song into the feet. Not a person was present who did not look the lady or gentleman. Practically every one was drinking, but no one was drinking much, and there was no disorder. There was nothing visible to offend, and everything to please, the refined person with money who had liberal ideas regarding one's rights to take one's pleasures as one liked them.

But Clifford knew one fact concerning The Pipes o' Pan he had not considered necessary or wise to impart to Mrs. Arlington. Bradley privately owned the place, or else controlled it either by subsidy to the nominal owner or by some hold upon that person.

Presently Clifford noted that Mrs. Arlington was among the dancers. Then her tall young partner in the Charleston, which was just then entering the first phase of its amazing popularity, must be that Mr. Frazer who had also been her partner in misfortune. Without seeming to heed the pair, Clifford intently studied Mr. Frazer. He was certainly a handsome, frank-faced fellow in the best of clothes, and if he were not really all that Mrs. Arlington had said of him, he certainly looked the whole of it. His bearing, his every move, were those of one who is a gentleman by birth and who honors woman in his every instinct. And certainly he was a remarkable dancer, which was also true of Mrs. Arlington; their Charleston, intricate but ever light and graceful, could have been put without further rehearsal into any Broadway musical play and have scored a hit. No wonder that the dance-loving Mrs. Arlington, willful and neglected, should have forgotten the sterner precepts of Mrs. Grundy in favor of such a dancing partner.

His study of the couple justified one reason Clifford

had had for asking Mrs. Arlington to be present, proved one essential thing upon which part of his vaguely growing plan was based. Mrs. Arlington had not lied to him about the real character of her affair with Mr. Frazer: she obviously liked him, but just as obviously her liking was warmed by no slightest feeling of romance.

The music ended and the two took their places at a table arranged for four. And then something suddenly boiled up in Clifford. Crossing toward their table he saw Bradley, with Mary Regan on his arm. He watched the greetings, watched them take their places — recording only subconsciously that Mrs. Arlington was playing extremely well the rôle he had assigned her. Then he resolutely turned his head away. It was too much, this bitterness of seeing Mary at Bradley's side, smiling at Bradley's attentions, when at himself she never smiled.

The music started again, and filled the floor with couples swinging to its magic beat and harmony. The next moment the one chair across Clifford's little table was drawn out and in it Bradley sat down and smiled at him in a high mood of mocking, derisive, gibing challenge.

'Hello, Clifford. Sitting here alone you look like a man drunk with his own sorrow.'

'That, Bradley, is because I'm trying to look upon a bit of New York night life.'

'Sure you're not out again trying to get me?' he inquired in a tone of cool effrontery.

'I don't seem to have much luck at that, Bradley,' Clifford replied in like voice. 'No more than you have had in getting me.'

'Perhaps you won't always get an even break, Clifford.'

'No. Some day I expect to get much better than an even break, Bradley. You almost had me headed for Sing-Sing with that fake raised check of Forsythe's you had deposited in my bank. You want me out of your way, Bradley, but somehow you don't seem quite able to make the grade.'

'And somehow you've had the luck of the game, Clifford. But your luck won't always hold.'

'Nor perhaps your luck, either, Bradley.'

The two enemies gazed at each other for a long moment with cool, grim, calculating smiles. Though he managed to smile, there was bitter determination in Clifford's soul. This audaciously smiling man across the table was not alone the social menace he had long tried to eliminate; he was not alone the man who had in some inexplicable way attracted Mary Regan away from himself. He was also the man who, during every day that he remained uncaught, was trying to eliminate Clifford as the chief obstacle to his bold schemes, to his soaring ambitions.

And yet Clifford had to give Bradley a grudging admiration for his undoubted courage, for his rare if misguided ability, for the really excellent job he had made out of transforming himself, through the hardest kind of training and self-discipline, into an externally finished man of the world. In his evening clothes from one of the city's highest-priced tailors Bradley looked, in his heavy, dark fashion, a figure of outstanding mark — sinister to Clifford, of course — but to those who knew him less well he undoubtedly appeared a personage of rare distinction.

'Once or twice, Clifford,' mused Bradley in his slow, bantering, fleering tone, 'I have gently hinted that it might be to our common interest to join forces.' At times they were frank with each other, these two, when

others were not close enough to overhear. 'But now there doesn't seem to be room enough for the pair of us. You've already lost out on Mary Regan, Clifford, and I think you'll lose out on all the rest. I'll rather miss you, Clifford, but you're the one who'll have to go.'

'As to which of us it will be who goes, Bradley, time will decide that.'

'All right — we'll leave the decision to time, giving time a little personal assistance.' Bradley stood up. 'Always a pleasure to have such an informal little chat with you, Clifford.'

With a taunting smile of gay parting, Bradley turned and with easy step crossed to his table. Clifford could but watch him, again with grudging admiration. The man truly was amazing!

Then the music started again; and this time it was Mary who was Frazer's partner. She danced with a certain reserve, but always with a grace which was confident of itself; and all the while they danced she was chatting easily with Frazer — evidently the two were on a very friendly basis. The acid of his personal situation bit deeper into Clifford's soul; Mary would dance graciously enough with others, but him she ever kept at a stranger's distance.

The next dance he had to watch her dance with Bradley, and at its end he had another instance of the high mockery, the flaunting audacity, which seemed to possess Bradley that night. The dance's end left the couple close to Clifford's table, and Bradley turned upon him.

'Still sitting it out alone, Clifford? Too bad. I wonder, now, if by any chance you have ever met my partner, Miss Regan?'

Clifford, who had risen, bowed very formally. Mary barely nodded.

Bradley might have gone on with this pleasurable goading of his enemy, this gloating over his companionship with Mary, but the dance's end had also left Mrs. Arlington and Frazer near Clifford's table, and they had now advanced to Bradley's side. There followed the somewhat informal introductions customary in such places as The Pipes o' Pan, and then Bradley's audacity rose yet one notch higher.

'Why sit here alone, Clifford?' he challenged. 'Come, join us at our table.'

Clifford accepted the challenge. 'Thanks, Bradley, I'll be glad to.'

The five crossed to Bradley's table. After a time Clifford found himself dancing with Mrs. Arlington. Both maintained the air of strangers, met for the first time; though Clifford managed to give Mrs. Arlington whispered commendation for the way she was playing her part. And then, perhaps an hour later, in the shifting of partners, Clifford at last was left alone at the table with Mary.

At first he could not speak; could only hold his eyes upon her in a sideling gaze. She was all in black, which was simple but rich emphasis for her ivory-white beauty of face and her thick dark hair — and which also emphasized her coldness to him, her far remoteness. Despite her treatment of him, she seemed utterly lovely to Clifford, and he almost choked in his desire for the return of that relationship which had briefly bloomed with such wondrous glow of promise, only to shrivel into this present inexplicable chill.

'Mary, would you mind dancing this with me?' he at length forced his husky voice to ask.

'Thank you; I prefer not,' was her reply.

Her formal, almost indifferent, tone brought an end to the spontaneous uprush of warm hope, which per-

sisted in him against his will, that some day she might alter toward him. He was silent a moment, then he shifted to another subject.

'Just who are these friends of yours I was introduced to to-night? I mean Mrs. Arlington and Mr. Frazer.'

'They are both new to me. I understand that Mrs. Arlington is a rich woman whose husband is now in the Southwest. Mr. Frazer I have merely met here and in other dancing places; he seems to be a well-to-do gentleman, and is an unusually good dancer. That is all I know about them.'

The cool finality of her tone effectively closed that subject. There was again a brief silence; then the growing bitterness in Clifford got the better of his control.

'I see that you are still as friendly as ever with Bradley!'

'I believe I am within my rights when I choose my own friends,' she returned.

'Yes — but to choose such a man as Bradley as a friend! When you know he is the greatest crook in New York! When you yourself saw him almost trap me, in a way that would have meant prison to me, with that falsified Forsythe check. Except for sheer good fortune, almost pure luck, he would have had me long ago with the traps laid for me! And you call such a man friend!'

'I believe you have also laid a few traps for Mr. Bradley. You must excuse me if I cannot feel any great interest in the personal vendetta between two rival detectives.'

'You *should* feel an interest!' he whispered hotly. 'After all, you really are my wife!'

'Please remember that I have often told you that any time you wish to marry any one else, I will at

once release you from your promise to keep that mistaken marriage a secret and will as quickly as possible free you for remarriage.'

She had him silenced by those coldly modulated words. There was no one else he loved, and he did not believe he ever could love any one else. And despite all that had happened, his heart somehow did not wish freedom from the shadowy unreality, the miserable failure, which their marriage had been.

There was no further chance for talk with Mary, for the others were now returning to the table. Clifford left The Pipes o' Pan at three o'clock. Personally it had been a bitter night for him; but despite his bitterness he had kept his professional eyes watching everything, though seemingly they had noted nothing. And he had an idea, the beginning of a plan, for handling Mrs. Arlington's affair: based, at least partly, upon one lie he believed Mary had told him.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WIDOW'S HUSBAND

From slight gestures and momentary glances he had caught, Clifford concluded that the handsome Frazer was very much better known to Mary than the mere dancing acquaintance her words had been intended to make him believe. Clifford determined to watch the movements of Mary and this Frazer and try to secure more definite information about the latter. There was rarely anything to be gained from watching Bradley, for his work was altogether too subtle, too devious, too carefully covered up.

The following day, aided by his old friend Detective Sergeant Jimmie Kelly of Headquarters, Clifford was on the trail of Mrs. Arlington's captivating dancing partner. The substance of what he learned was that Frazer had a handsome bachelor apartment, drove a handsome car, was favorably known along Broadway. He was of no known family, and he had no known background prior to his appearance in New York three years earlier. He was apparently just an exceptionally good sample of those smartly dressed young men, with plenty of money, plenty of time, excellent manners, of whom New York City has its thousand and tens of thousands; for New York is pleasure's capital toward which moneyed young men, who want the smartest gayety for their money, inevitably journey from all parts of the country. He seemed one of the most attractive of this host of leisured gallants who endure the day because its stupidity is rewarded by the gayety and glamour of the night.

Mr. Frazer, in brief, might have been anything. Not a thing did Clifford turn up to disturb the pleasant lines of Mrs. Arlington's portrait of him: nothing, that is, except those swift and silent communications between him and Mary.

The days of silent watching which followed developed in Clifford the certainty that Frazer and Mary were not mere incidental playmates; they were workmates as well. Himself unseen, Clifford saw them lunching together several times at the Grantham Hotel, and in close converse in the lounge-rooms off its deep-carpeted main avenue; and always the two were at perfect ease, and were always talking in low tones upon what seemed to be important matters of common interest. He wished that he were a master of lip-reading, that he might listen through eyes to their unheard speech, but this art was beyond him.

But though he became more convinced that these two were his best key for unlocking the facts in the affair of Mrs. Arlington's missing pendant, the days passed without Clifford gaining definite evidence. There was but one thing for him to do: to maintain his patient, monotonous watch of the couple, and try to work out some clever new device for securing the secret knowledge which they possessed.

On the fifth day after the evening at The Pipes o' Pan Mrs. Arlington called up and in frantic voice demanded to see Clifford at once; the matter was something she could not risk telling him over the telephone. Despite his orders to her to keep away from him, Clifford yielded to her importunities, and an hour later she was in his office. Her face was almost ghastly in its pallor and its strain, and in it was a frightened, hunted, desperate look.

'My husband came home yesterday,' she said —

'several days earlier than I had expected him. He was most happy to see me. But in his mail this morning there was a note. That changed him entirely toward me. He's — he's almost crazy! I told you how jealous he is.'

'Did Mr. Arlington tell you what was in that note?'

'No. But there was no need of that, for in the same mail I received a copy of the note. Here it is.'

Clifford studied the note that she handed him. Its few lines were typewritten and it was unsigned. It contained no definite statements; its substance was merely vague hints, enough to arouse the suspicion of Mr. Arlington and the frenzied fear of Mrs. Arlington — but hints that easily might dissipate into nothingness were they not made definite and pressed home.

'The purpose of this note is very obvious,' observed Clifford. 'It is to frighten you into immediately making the payment required for the return of the pendant. It is pressure of the most ingenious kind.'

'But I simply cannot raise a hundred thousand without Paul finding it out and finding out my reason!' she cried. 'And I simply must have that pendant within five days, for as I told you next Friday is our fourth wedding anniversary, and as I told you Paul will certainly be expecting me to wear his first anniversary gift. If I don't have it —' She finished the sentence with a gesture which expressed despair's finality.

'You still are averse to telling your husband the truth?' inquired Clifford.

'I can't, I can't, I told you!' she exclaimed wildly. 'Paul's jealousy would make him believe the bandits, not me!'

'Then your only course is to control yourself as well as you can while I am trying to do my best.'

She had been gone no more than five minutes when Mr. Arlington's card was brought in to Clifford. Clifford ordered him admitted, and, before he was seated beside Clifford's desk, Clifford had made his swift estimate of him. The young man was slender, erect, distinctly the thoroughbred, with a sensitive, intense, proud, fundamentally fine nature: plainly of the type that drives itself at highest speed, is accustomed to giving orders and receiving swift and unquestioning obedience. Just now his rather thin features were taut and pale. Instantly Clifford knew Mrs. Arlington had been entirely right in her statement about her husband's temper and jealousy.

Mr. Arlington lost not a word in getting at his business. 'Mrs. Arlington has just been to see you,' he stated crisply, his eyes of authority hard upon Clifford's, and obviously holding himself in with a tight rein. 'You are a detective. Mrs. Arlington is plainly in some difficulty. I must request you to tell me just what business Mrs. Arlington can have with a detective.'

'And I,' returned Clifford, matching his crispness of tone, 'must request you to permit me not to tell.'

The young man flushed at this unaccustomed rebuff. 'What — you refuse me, then?'

'Most certainly. I have no obligations toward you. My business relations are entirely with Mrs. Arlington, and for the present they are confidential. If you wish to know the exact nature of those relations, ask your wife. I have no objections to her telling you anything which she desires — or which you may be able to extract from her by threats and browbeating.'

At that last harsh phrase, Mr. Arlington half-rose from his chair, fury in his eyes. 'What's that?' he snapped.

'Sit down, and listen to me!' Clifford suddenly drove at him. 'Mr. Arlington, you are a very rich man — you are a very able man — you are a very hard-working man — in many respects you are a man of very fine honor. But also, Mr. Arlington, you are one of the world's greatest fools.'

Mr. Arlington fairly gasped at the swift manner in which dominance of the situation had been snatched from him and he had been put upon the defensive. 'In what way am I a fool?' he demanded.

'I shall not try to explain,' Clifford drove on. 'You haven't the sense to understand now; I hope that later you will have the sense. Just now my chief effort, Mr. Arlington, is to prevent you from making a bigger fool of yourself than is absolutely necessary!'

Young Arlington looked as if he were about to explode. But he controlled himself.

'You will at least admit, Mr. Clifford,' he said haughtily, 'that my wife is in trouble, and that it is only natural that I should feel concern.'

'It is obvious that she is in trouble, or she would not be consulting a detective. But I'd be a detective worthy of mighty little confidence if I let your unbalanced, untrustworthy concern increase that trouble. Answer this question: provided Mrs. Arlington's trouble arises from a fundamentally innocent source, do you wish to help remove that trouble, or do you wish to multiply it?'

'Help remove it, of course.'

'Then the only way you can help is for the present to keep yourself absolutely out of things. Before she came to me Mrs. Arlington consulted Mrs. Forsythe, her son, and Miss Jean Fenton, all friends of yours, as to both my ability and responsibility. I suggest that you also consult them upon these points, and if you

find their answer the same, that you leave Mrs. Arlington's trouble to me.'

Mr. Arlington held his blazing eyes questioningly on Clifford for a moment. But the way in which Clifford had seized and held mastery of their brief scene had won his respect.

'Very well — I agree,' he said.

'Good. Then, Mr. Arlington, I agree to see that you learn all that it is necessary for you to know when the proper moment for your knowing comes. Also I may ask you to help me out in some matters; I shall be glad if you will hold yourself in readiness to give such aid.'

'I shall do so, Mr. Clifford.'

Notwithstanding this agreement, after Mr. Arlington had gone, Clifford felt uneasiness because of him. Unused to restraint, to taking orders from others, he was a potential danger with that jealous, explosive nature of his. But both he and his wife were at bottom fine, sound people, if only sanity and understanding could be injected into them. Their marriage was perilously near the rocks; and more and more it became Clifford's purpose in this affair, not merely to recover the ruby pendant, but to save their marriage. To save their marriage — to save Mary from her perversities — perhaps to get Bradley, whom he sensed as the sinister figure behind everything: surely a sum of motives to drive a man forward in any cause!

CHAPTER XIX

THROUGH CLOSED DOORS

Two days later, after trying with much thought to devise some new and intricate method for gaining knowledge of what was between Mary and Frazer, opportunity came to Clifford in the form of the most ancient of all devices. In this he was once again served by luck, as in several recent situations; by pure, blind luck, plus a little carelessness on Mary's part.

The first phase of this opportunity came during luncheon time at the Grantham. Around the high-ceilinged main dining-room there ran a balcony divided by curtains into compartments or booths, not unlike theater boxes, opening upon the scene below and intended to give semi-privacy to small parties. These booths had before served Clifford as vantage-points from which he could see much and occasionally hear a little. On this day he was in a booth, and Mary and Frazer were directly beneath him, and their talk, which Mary apparently was dominating, was plainly of a less pleasant character than at their previous meetings. The orchestra was playing, and to hear each other above it they were talking in full voice. When the music abruptly reached its finale on one of those unprepared-for chords of jazz, Mary's sharp speech continued in its full tone and a fragment came up to Clifford.

'— and so finish your coffee and come up to my room where I can put to you more definitely just what I've been intimating. I can spare you five minutes before I go —'

Mary suddenly became conscious that her voice was no longer battling against the orchestra, and her speech lowered to a whisper. But Clifford had heard enough and was away. He had recalled the big wardrobe closet in Mary's sitting-room he had used upon another occasion; he still carried the set of duplicate keys he had had secretly made to Mary's suite; and two minutes after he had left the dining-room he was locked inside Mary's big closet, listening intently.

He had no more than a minute or so to wait. As soon as they had entered, he heard Mary say in an ominously restrained voice:

'And now, Mr. Harold Frazer, you and I are going to come to an understanding, and mighty quick. Are you going to play square, are you going to stick this thing through, or are you not?'

'I don't get you at all, Mary!' protested Frazer. 'Of course I'm going to stick! I don't see where you got this new twisted idea!'

'From the way you've been behaving toward Mrs. Arlington,' continued the hard, ominous voice. 'I think you've gone soft on her. I think you're likely to ditch the game at the last minute for her sweet sake.'

'I tell you, Mary, you're seeing me cross-eyed! Can't you see that I've had to keep on playing up to her, so she'd not suspect? Can't you see that?'

'I can hear it, but I'm not sure of it, and I'm not sure of you. But I'm going to make sure of you. That's why I brought you up here — to put it to you straight. You either play square or you go up the river for that Parker diamond affair.'

'Why — my God, Mary — I swear —'

'You thought I didn't know that you really stole that necklace, though Larry Wheeler is the only one doing time for that business. But I do know, and I

know that Mr. Harold Frazer thinks that he is about the cleverest man along Fifth Avenue and Broadway at lifting the jewelry of rich, fascinated women. And I know that Larry Wheeler is keeping quiet about your end of that Parker necklace affair only because he thinks you have got his cut of the proceeds banked, waiting for him when he comes out. If Larry is given the order, he'll come clean about you and you'll make a quick trip up to where he is spending a long vacation. Now is it clear to you just how things stand with you? Now are you going to stick?'

'Of course, Mary,' the other said in a husky, quavering voice. 'I — I never intended anything else. And I don't see why you should doubt me when Bradley trusts me.'

'Mr. Bradley may take you on trust, but I don't and I won't — not after the way you've kept on playing with Mrs. Arlington. Now I think you understand me. The best thing for you to do is to fade out of the scene as quick as you can and keep under cover until this matter is settled. That's all. Good-bye.'

Clifford heard Frazer go out. Motionless in his closet, Clifford stood amazed at what had been revealed to him. Of course he had suspected from the time Mrs. Arlington had first told her story that she was unconsciously the victim of a folly which in all its dangerous elements of obvious and suggested unpropriety was an adroitly manufactured folly. But he now knew it. And the fact that Frazer was the second man in that partially solved Parker diamond case, this was news, and it gave him a solid fact such as he had been seeking.

In another minute Clifford heard Mary go out, and two minutes thereafter he himself slipped from her suite. An hour after that Frazer, in response to an

intriguing but unalarming telephone message, walked into an office that had been borrowed by its occupants for that particular occasion. These occupants were Clifford and two assistants of an intimidating breadth of shoulders. When the Parker robbery and Larry Wheeler had been mentioned, Frazer collapsed and told all he knew about the affair of Mrs. Arlington's pendant. Also he consented to go into voluntary retirement — which course chanced to coincide with orders to him from Mary Regan and would therefore not arouse suspicion — in custody of the two powerful gentlemen, and to reappear when Clifford so desired.

This was much, but Clifford had not yet solved his case. And he had not yet achieved his main purpose, which was to save the Arlington marriage by jolting sense into the loving but foolish couple.

From what he had forced from Frazer, and from his own deductions, Clifford was certain that Mrs. Arlington's pendant was now in Bradley's possession and was left by him where it could be instantly produced whenever Mrs. Arlington was ready to meet the terms imposed. But just where was it? The very requirements of the situation eliminated a safe-deposit box, inaccessible during eighteen hours out of the twenty-four. And Clifford eliminated Bradley's house out at Green Manors, for during the progress of the Arlington affair Bradley had most of the time been remaining in the city. Clifford also eliminated Bradley's office; this Arlington affair was not really in the line of Bradley's detective business, which he maintained as a blind and as a feeder to his real and secret occupation. There remained only Bradley's apartment, just off Riverside Drive, in which he had been living these last two weeks.

The pendant was there, Clifford decided. If not, he would try to influence Bradley to bring it there.

Accordingly Clifford prepared to stage the final act of the Arlington drama in Bradley's apartment. As part of this preparation, Clifford had certain things done to Bradley's door, while no one was in the apartment, by an ex-flat-burglar known as 'Key-Ring Harry' — so named because he had a super-locksmith's skill in all matters pertaining to locks and keys. The results of Key-Ring Harry's endeavor were very thorough: a key to Bradley's apartment; the careful oiling into silence of every bit of steel that moved; the filing-down of the threads of the heavy screws which held in place the chain-bolt; the replacement of all these guards against intrusion so that they looked as impregnably solid as before.

Also Clifford had several secret conferences. The result of one of these was that Mrs. Arlington got word to Bradley on Thursday morning that at last she had raised the required hundred thousand for the pendant, but that because of her husband she could not manage to slip away to complete the transaction until after dinner that night — the night before her wedding anniversary. Bradley's reply, as Clifford had anticipated, was for her to call alone at his apartment at ten o'clock.

She was there. She was no more than admitted when Clifford with a hand on Arlington's arm was outside Bradley's door. His plan for the saving of the Arlington marriage was to hit these two splendid fools, each of whom was unconscious of what the other was doing that night, as hard and as direct as possible with the facts and consequences of their own folly. Clifford had previously sworn Mr. Arlington to remain silent and inactive until released from his promise.

Clifford noiselessly opened the door an inch. Voices came out to them.

'So you have finally decided to settle, have you?' inquired Bradley.

'Yes,' replied Mrs. Arlington. 'You have my pendant ready for me?'

'I can produce it.'

'May — may I see it, please?' she continued with the questions Clifford had drilled her in.

Clifford could not see the act, but Bradley's hand started toward a drawer of his desk, then paused.

'You may see it after you have paid the hundred thousand agreed upon for its return.'

Outside the door Mr. Arlington was barely able to choke back a gasp at this first hint of the character of his wife's predicament.

'But a hundred thousand seems such an awful lot for the return of a thing that is only worth ten thousand.'

'Would you rather have your husband learn the truth?' Bradley asked pointedly.

'Of course not! Never! But — but things have developed unexpectedly since I made my promise to you this morning. I was counting on my mother for most of the money, but when I went to her on my way here, she did not yet have it. So I have only twenty thousand with me.'

'What's that?' Bradley snapped.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Bradley. But can't you let me have the pendant now for twenty thousand and let me pay the balance later?'

'Most certainly not, Mrs. Arlington! That pendant is the bandits' chief item of evidence against you. With the pendant in your hands, you might refuse to pay the balance.'

'Oh, I don't know what I'm going to do!' she wailed. 'I simply must have that pendant to-morrow!'

'Then you'll produce the hundred thousand by to-morrow,' Bradley said with ominous finality, 'or else —' He left his sentence unfinished.

'Yes, yes?' she breathed. 'What else?'

'Or else to-morrow your husband will learn the full truth about you, and I may as well tell you that the bandits have learned more than they formerly knew. Here will be the full story that they will present to your husband, Mrs. Arlington. They will tell him that you took advantage of his absence to become involved in a clandestine love affair with Mr. Harold Frazer. That you were frequently with him in the city at all-night dancing resorts, and they will give names to prove their assertions. And finally they will tell him about your very private gay little four A.M. road-house party with Mr. Frazer at that notorious Gray Goose Inn the night they broke in on you and stole your pendant. You know about what will happen when Mr. Arlington learns all these facts.'

She learned at once. Clifford had intended that Arlington should overhear, but he had not intended the action of Arlington which immediately followed. Clifford had wanted the money which Mrs. Arlington had to be first passed to Bradley, later to be found on Bradley's person. However, the mere finding of the pendant in Bradley's possession would be enough to establish his guilt.

With the strength of sudden insanity Arlington broke away from Clifford and crashed through the door, uprooting the chain-bolt. With Clifford just behind him he went lunging through the little hallway and into the chamber that served Bradley both as living-room and study, and a trembling, contorted figure of fury he confronted his wife.

CHAPTER XX

THE RESCUED MARRIAGE

MRS. ARLINGTON let out a shriek, and backed away from her husband in ghastly terror.

'So that's your trouble — your secret!' Arlington cried, eyes flaming at her in his insane fury. 'An affair with another man!'

'Say, what are you two doing here?' thundered the amazed Bradley, who had sprung to his feet at this sudden interruption of a strictly private enterprise.

But Arlington gave Bradley no heed. Nor at that moment did Clifford; his first interest was in the working-out of his plan concerning the domestic relationship of the Arlingtons.

'So you've got an affair with another man!' Arlington, trembling with his jealousy, blazed at his wife. 'So you've used my absence to indulge in a love affair — a scandalous, sordid love affair! — with another man!'

'Paul — Paul,' gasped the terrified wife — 'it's not so! It's not so! — not the way you think!'

'It is so!' he cried back at her in his terrible voice. 'If you were not guilty, would you be paying a hundred thousand to keep the thing hidden from me?'

'Paul — Paul — listen! I swear it was not —'

'Don't lie to me!' he interrupted her. 'It's no use! I've overheard everything — your coming into town to meet this — this secret lover of yours — your very private four-o'clock party with young Mr. Frazer at that terrible Gray Goose Inn!'

Mrs. Arlington gave Clifford a swift glance of tor-

tured accusation. 'And you — you promised to help *me!*'

'I am,' he returned. 'And helping you in the best way possible. Please remember our original bargain: that I was to be free to handle your case in the way I thought best.'

'Say,' roughly broke in Bradley, 'if this is a family quarrel, I wish you'd take it from here to where it belongs — home!'

Clifford turned upon the glowering, black-faced Bradley. Beside the desk stood Mary Regan — evidently she had quietly slipped in right after their own abrupt entrance. Clifford was not surprised to see her; he had half-expected her to be on hand to help out Bradley; and evidently Bradley was no more surprised than himself.

'We'll all stay right where we are till we're ready to go, Bradley,' Clifford said with hard authority. 'I don't wonder that you're sore,' he taunted, 'since you've seen the value of that ruby pendant suddenly drop from one hundred thousand to ten thousand!'

Bradley almost choked in his fury. Clifford turned quickly back to the husband and wife, for Arlington was speaking again.

'What do you want?' he flung at her. 'A divorce? You'll not get it from me! And I'll not have you around me! — the soiled leavings of another man! You may have your Mr. Frazer, and he's welcome to you — but from now on you've got to have him in public!'

She was now on her knees, clutching wildly at him, sobbing hysterically in her agony.

'Paul — Paul — I swear — it's not so — it's not so — not the way you think!'

'Don't touch me!' he cried, and pushed her from him.

She lay a limp, huddled heap of heaving misery upon the floor. Clifford could see that the husband, for all his overmastering, jealous wrath, was suffering an anguish as excruciating, as abysmal, as the wife. Clifford let a moment pass, that their suffering might be an unforgettable memory, a lesson that might reshape their lives with understanding. Then he moved forward and laid a commanding hand upon the husband's arm.

'Arlington, the day I first saw you I told you you were a fool. I told you I would not then explain, because you could not then understand. I've let this business go as far as it has to-night for the sake of making you understand by a concrete situation — you're the sort who can't understand without concrete and almost tragic proof — just how great a fool you are!'

'Don't you dare talk to me like that!' Arlington raged at him.

'I'll talk to you just as I please, Arlington, and just as you deserve. I was engaged to clear up this whole matter, and I'm going to clear it up. I repeat that you are a fool! And get this: you are the one who is most to blame for this present situation!'

'I? When my wife and this Frazer —'

'Don't forever be seeing your wife's mistakes and weaknesses!' Clifford drove at him. 'Sometimes take a steady look at your own mistakes! Your wife has a normal woman's instinct for legitimate pleasure and companionship, and she'd vastly prefer having her pleasure in your company. But there are a lot of husbands of your sort in this country: you all think you love your wives, but you are all so infernally interested in your business and personal ambitions, which sometimes are mighty unimportant, that you have no time

to be human beings toward your wives. Being denied the company of their husbands, they naturally respond to other companionship which may be offered. The summer widow, and her complications, are an old, old story; but you've made Mrs. Arlington a summer widow twelve months out of every year. She's a victim of your neglect; and yet you blame her for the direct consequences of your own neglect. You are the kind of man who forces his wife into a mistake; who forces her into a divorce situation; then righteously places all the blame and the shame and the sin upon her! You're worse than a fool, Arlington! You're a selfish idiot, without sense of justice, fairness, or mere plain decency!'

Arlington stood blinking at Clifford, dazed by the crunching directness of this speech. But his jealous wrath was not yet allayed.

'Even if I have been negligent,' he retorted, 'that's no excuse for my wife becoming involved in such a scandalous, sordid intrigue —'

'Listen,' Clifford interrupted him. 'Mrs. Arlington was telling you the truth about that affair. That affair was not at all what it seems to be. Except for some rather foolish behavior, your wife is absolutely innocent.'

'Innocent!' he cried. 'Innocent — and in a private room with a man in a notorious road-house at four in the morning!'

'That's another thing husbands of your type let your wives in for,' Clifford drove on at him. 'Your treatment puts your wives at the mercy of smooth, clever tricksters — and New York City, and the rest of the world, is full of smooth tricksters on the lookout for just this kind of easy prey you husbands prepare for them! This whole business of the affair with Frazer

has been just a trick, and your wife has been its unconscious victim!'

'What?' exclaimed the dazed Arlington.

Mrs. Arlington had come to her feet, and was now staring in amazement at Clifford. 'A trick' — she breathed incredulously — 'a trick —'

'Exactly that — a trick. When Mrs. Arlington first went with a group of friends to The Pipes o' Pan,' Clifford continued, 'she was at once spotted as a rich, neglected wife — the sort that make easy, profitable prey. The people who spotted her knew that her husband was not only neglectful, but was also jealous, and this made the affair much better and safer for them. Accordingly a subtle plan was promptly made to trap her. I may at this point mention that The Pipes o' Pan is owned or controlled by Mr. Bradley here —'

'That's a lie!' Bradley snapped out.

'And The Pipes o' Pan is really Bradley's brilliant spider-web, spread to catch rich, gayly buzzing flies of pleasure. It is used by him as one of the many devices by which he learns of the indiscretions and follies of the respectable rich, which follies he cleverly turns to his profit. And if the follies do not already exist, then he uses the machinery of The Pipes o' Pan to create follies that are real, or that have the appearance of reality.'

'That's another lie!' snapped Bradley.

Clifford ignored him. 'You may now come in, Frazer,' he called.

From the hallway entered Mrs. Arlington's companion in misfortune. Instead of his accustomed easy, courtier-like, man-of-the-world appearance, he now wore the furtive look of a cornered animal.

'Frazer!' ejaculated the astounded Bradley.

'So — *you* are Frazer!' cried Arlington and made a rush for him with clenched fists.

Clifford blocked the furious husband.

'None of that, Arlington. Frazer is here to corroborate the rest of what I have to say. Frequenting The Pipes o' Pan are a number of superficially finished young gentlemen and ladies. They have the best of manners, otherwise they could not get on terms of intimacy with the rich patrons of the place. In reality they are the lesser birds of prey, or the agents of the big birds of prey. Several of these are Bradley's hirelings.

'Lies!' interjected Bradley. 'All lies!'

Clifford continued to ignore him. 'For Mrs. Arlington's case, Frazer was considered the best man. He played his part of the courteous gentleman so well that Mrs. Arlington had never a suspicion. Then came the night she wore the ruby pendant. The plot had long been in readiness, merely waiting until she wore something of significant value which could be stolen and used as a means of forcing money out of her. According to plan that night her car was put out of commission; according to plan Frazer offered to drive her home in his car; according to plan he had tire trouble which he could not himself remedy near the notorious Gray Goose Inn; according to plan a bit of supper was served in a little private room; according to plan the two hired bandits broke into this intricately arranged compromising situation, stole Mrs. Arlington's pendant, then one of them recognized her as ordered and made those remarks about her husband which were intended to rouse her fears and be the basis for asking a tremendous price for silence. Of course Mrs. Arlington believed the whole thing to be real. There, Mr. Arlington, you have the full truth of Mrs. Arlington's terrible relations with another man.'

Mrs. Arlington was gazing in astonishment at Clifford. 'Is — is that — all true?' she whispered tremulously.

'Ask Frazer here.'

'Frazer, keep your mouth shut!' ordered Bradley.

'Frazer, how about it?' demanded Clifford.

Frazer cast a sidelong glance of fear at Bradley, then faced the others.

'It was all just the way you said, Mr. Clifford,' whispered the Broadway gallant.

'Frazer, you infernal —' began Bradley.

'Shut up, Bradley!' Clifford cut in. 'We'll come to you in a minute, and then you'll have your chance.' He turned back upon Mr. Arlington. 'So you see, Arlington, this infamous conduct of your wife has been a deliberate frame-up from the beginning to the very end — and a frame-up which, I insist, would have been impossible but for your neglect of your wife and your insanely jealous nature: for upon those two points in you your wife's fear was based and the whole plot was based. You have all but wrecked a marriage by this situation which you brought about. I hope the affair has taught you the faint beginning of a little self-control and a little human consideration for your wife.'

Husband and wife were now gazing at each other with pale, strained, searching faces. They seemed incapable of speech or movement. Clifford permitted a moment of this staring silence. Then he whirled upon the lowering, defiant Bradley behind his desk, with Mary Regan white and tense standing close beside him. Clifford barely noted Mary's face at the time, but afterward it seemed to him that for the moment Mary's face had been strangely eager, breathlessly expectant.

'And now for you, Bradley!' he cried, triumph in

his voice. 'Mr. and Mrs. Arlington, Frazer was merely a pawn in the game, a paid actor in the play. The man behind it all — the man who paid Frazer, the bandits, the others — the man who would have got all of that hundred thousand except his expense money — that man is Bradley here!'

'Lies!' repeated Bradley between bared teeth, his face dark with his baffled fury. 'All of it — nothing but lies!'

'The proof of it, Bradley, is that you have had that ruby pendant since your bandits turned it over to you, and you now have it!'

'More of your lies! I haven't got the pendant!'

'You've got that pendant here, Bradley!' Clifford cried in grim triumph. Afterward he recalled that Mary's face, just behind Bradley's, was yet more strangely tense, more strangely breathless. 'And we've got you for conspiracy, robbery, and attempted blackmail! That will keep you where you belong for a good long while! Now come across with that pendant!'

Clifford advanced upon him. Bradley kept his glowering eyes on Clifford, and held his powerful body hunched down in readiness to receive or launch an attack. He snapped out to Mary:

'Mary, 'phone for the police!'

Mary moved forward and picked up the desk telephone.

''Phone for help from your confederates, you mean — no, you don't!' cried Clifford, and seizing the telephone wire he pulled it out by its very roots. 'Now 'phone all you like!'

Mary replaced the dead instrument. As she did so, Bradley jerked open the drawer on his right and when his right hand came up an automatic was trained on Clifford.

'Get out of here — all of you!' he barked. 'Get out, or I'll shoot!'

'No, you won't shoot,' returned Clifford, unperturbed. 'And we're not going until we've searched both you and your place.'

'You can't search my place without a search warrant!' Bradley barked on. 'Get out, or I'll shoot. And the law will justify me for shooting — you're nothing but house-breakers!'

'You're entirely right about the search warrant, Bradley,' returned Clifford. He raised his voice. 'Oh, Jimmie — I'd almost forgotten you! This is the time you were to come in!'

Detective Sergeant Kelly entered, behind him two policemen in uniform.

'Jimmie, show the large dark gentleman behind the desk the search warrant.'

Jimmie did as he was directed. Bradley glanced at the document.

'All right,' he growled submissively after a moment, and slowly lowered his automatic and replaced it in the drawer. When his right hand came out it was doubled into a mighty fist. 'Go ahead with your search. And while you search, I'll just —'

Without warning he lunged across the room at Frazer. 'You liar — you double-crosser!' he gritted. The big fist landed heavily, and the two went to the floor. For a few moments there was a rough-and-tumble fight all over the room, in which Bradley had all the better of the battling. In less than a minute Bradley was pulled away, snarling and cursing, from his slighter opponent.

'Go on with your search and get through with it and get out!' he interrupted his curses of Frazer to bark at Clifford. 'But you'll not find anything. I've al-

ready told you I haven't Mrs. Arlington's pendant.'

While they went through Bradley's clothes, through his desk, through all his apartment, Bradley remained indifferent to them, but sat glowering vindictively across at Frazer. At the end of fifteen minutes Clifford and the others had made a fairly thorough rough search — and had found no pendant.

'Better come through, Bradley,' advised Clifford, 'and tell us just where that ruby is.'

Bradley, still keeping his vindictive eyes on Frazer, replied sharply:

'All right — I'll come through. But first I want you to get this: I had absolutely nothing to do with any alleged frame-up of Mrs. Arlington and the stealing of her pendant, and you'll find that you'll not have one bit of credible evidence that sticks which will prove I did. And I've never seen and never handled the pendant and you'll not find anything to prove that I did. I admit nothing of the sort; you can prove nothing of the sort. My only connection with this affair has been to act as agent between Mrs. Arlington and the people who stole her ruby — and such negotiations are commonplaces of my business as a private detective.'

Suddenly his voice grated out harshly, accusingly. 'Frazer — I'd have kept quiet about you if you hadn't lied about me, tried to get out of the thing by shifting the blame on me! Now you're going to get what's coming to you! Clifford, this man has admitted his guilt in a large part of this affair; perhaps he's guilty of a lot more than he has admitted. I'll tell you this much: he's the man who first came to me as the representative of the bandits and asked me to handle the negotiations with Mrs. Arlington. I can't prove anything more, of course, but I've believed all the time that Frazer was the real head of the gang.'

'Why — why' — gasped Frazer — 'you outrageous —'

'I suggest, Clifford,' Bradley steadily went on, 'that you ask Frazer where the pendant is. Or even search him. I deny any part in this matter, except a legitimate professional one; you have not, and will not have, any evidence against me; and yet I have been subjected to search. On the other hand, Frazer has admitted a guilty part in the conspiracy and robbery. You might at least examine an admitted thief as thoroughly as you have examined me.'

Long before he had finished, Clifford had sensed danger in those steady sentences of Bradley. Was this to be another of the many instances in which Bradley had swiftly and unexpectedly squirmed out in some amazing way at the very moment Clifford had believed him firmly caught? His high triumph was already ebbing sickeningly as he said to Jimmie Kelly:

'Give Frazer the once-over, Jimmie.'

Jimmie obeyed, and the next moment he turned to Clifford saying, 'Found this in his inside coat pocket,' and handed Clifford a thin white chain and a glinting, glorious, pear-shaped globule of heart's fire.

'My pendant!' cried Mrs. Arlington in amazed relief. 'My pendant!'

'Well, Clifford — I guess I handed you the straight tip!' remarked Bradley.

Frazer, who had been gasping, now suddenly found his speech.

'I tell you I didn't know I had that!' he cried wildly. 'I've never seen that pendant once since the night those bandits took it from Mrs. Arlington! Never — I tell you, never!'

The trick was now plain to Clifford. He turned on Bradley.

'You planted that on him, Bradley.'

'Oh, I did, did I!'

'Yes. That pendant was in the drawer of your desk. When you put back your pistol, your right hand came out clenched as if in anger, but in reality to hide the ruby inside it. When you rough-housed Frazer, it was for the purpose of putting the ruby in his clothes.'

'So you say,' Bradley returned coolly. 'But I say I never had that pendant. And I say, when I mixed it up with Frazer, it was just because I lost my temper — and who wouldn't after having had such lies told about him?'

'All the same, Bradley, I know, and we all know, that you were behind every move against Mrs. Arlington, and that you had that pendant until you planted it on Frazer.'

'I don't give a counterfeit Russian ruble what you think you know about me, Clifford. It is only proof that counts. And of proof that will stand up in a courtroom, you haven't got one bit, and you know it.'

Clifford knew this. He had knowledge of Bradley's guilt, but knowledge is not evidence. He might possibly get an indictment; he could not get conviction. Once again Bradley had escaped him in the moment of expected triumph. Clifford gazed at Mary Regan. Her strange look of tense, suppressed excitement was now gone; her face was pale, but otherwise was without expression. Clifford felt sick — sick to his very soul.

He turned about. 'Jimmie, you might as well be going along with Frazer. You know what to do with him.' And as Jimmie's group moved out, Clifford faced the Arlingtons. 'There's your pendant, Mrs. Arlington. You have it back in time for your wedding anniversary.' She took it, and silently slipped it into the hand of her husband. 'I hope, Mr. and Mrs.

Arlington, you don't now object to the way I've handled your case. My part in your affair is now all over; the rest is entirely up to the two of you. Good-night.'

He turned his back upon them before either could make reply, and again steadily gazed upon Bradley and Mary Regan. He heard the Arlingtons go out, and after a moment he spoke.

'You're clever, Bradley — yes, you're clever — but some day there'll come one last time, Bradley, when with all your tricks you won't be able to squirm out,' he grimly prophesied. 'And in this case, even if I haven't got you, I've at least managed to block your latest little game of trying to frighten an easy hundred thousand out of a woman's purse into your own.'

His eyes fastened on Mary Regan. 'I don't know exactly what your part has been in this game, Miss Regan, except to help out Bradley,' he said in a hard-edged voice that bespoke the great bitterness of his soul. 'But whatever your game has been, I also have blocked you.'

She made no reply; just held her white expressionless face fixed upon him. He turned and went out, followed by a soft, gibing laugh from Bradley.

His sickness of heart remained with him during his ride down the elevator: sickness due to this one more failure to land Bradley — but due more to the mysterious perversity of Mary Regan's actions, to her baffling indifference to him.

When he came out upon the sidewalk, a woman's voice called to him from the curb. He crossed to the roadster standing there. In it sat the Arlingtons, one of Mr. Arlington's arms around his wife. Mrs. Arlington pushed the folds of her cloak away from her throat.

'Look!' she said, a happy, choking throb in her voice. 'Paul — he just put it on me again!'

On her white throat hung the ruby pendant.

'And — and, Mr. Clifford,' the husband said huskily, 'I've been thinking — we've talked a little — and I think you were right in what you said about me to-night. And I'm going to try to start all over — and — and never again let Kathleen be a summer widow twelve months out of the year.'

'And — and — Mr. Clifford' — Mrs. Arlington in her happiness was now sobbing without restraint — 'we both want you — to come out to-morrow — to our anniversary! Please!'

He had to promise. As he watched their car move away and melt into the night, a warmer mood was born within him. Well, if he hadn't achieved all he had tried to achieve in this affair, what he had achieved had been very much worth while. He had cleared away the tangle in two other hearts, even though he seemed unable to clear away the strange tangle in his own.

CHAPTER XXI

A BROADWAY ROMANCE

EVEN while Clifford was greeting his two callers and was motioning them to chairs, he was making that swift, preliminary summary which with him had grown into an unconscious habit. To the girl — Miss Janet Graham, said her card — his heart went instantly. She was perhaps twenty-one, a slender beauty of a thoroughbred, with wide brown eyes from which gazed a fine, loyal, sincere soul. The young man — Robert Jones, said his card — was perhaps twenty-three, and obviously had breeding and wealth. In his white, sensitive face Clifford read suppressed agony; in the girl's, a pained bewilderment.

'What can I do for you?' Clifford asked when they were seated.

It was the girl who answered. 'I'll tell my part first, for it isn't much and I must be going in a minute. But to begin, perhaps I'd better explain what brought me to you. It was this letter. Each of us received almost identically the same letter in our morning's mail. The letter is so urgent and so positive that I insisted we act upon it, even though it is anonymous and I don't understand our — I mean Robert's — trouble.'

Clifford glanced the typewritten letter through. It was indeed urgent in advising the recipient to place his predicament in Clifford's hands. But the anonymity, not the substance, of the letter was what most incited Clifford's interest. These anonymous letters had grown to be a minor mystery in his life, a mystery which he hoped some day to solve.

'Go on, Miss Graham,' said Clifford. 'And bear in mind that the more frank you are, the more will you make it possible for me to help you.'

'Robert and I are engaged,' promptly began the clear-eyed girl. 'We have been engaged for over a year — secretly. One of our difficulties has been Robert's mother. If you know anything of the rich people of the country, you have at least heard of her. When her husband died over ten years ago he left his steel interests — all of us are Pittsburgh people — and everything else to her, trusting her to provide for Robert. Robert has been absolutely dependent upon the allowance his mother has given him.

'Since you ordered me to be frank, I suppose I must try to give you a picture of his mother as I see her — particularly since she's behind much of the trouble. She's nice enough, and generous enough, in her way; but she's terribly proud. I don't want to hurt Robert's feelings, but I think she's pretty much of a snob. I'm certain she continues to keep him on an allowance because she thought by so doing she could control his conduct. Robert wanted to work as his father had worked, in steel, and he wanted to make some studies along the lines of all the newest processes — he'd already done a lot of very advanced laboratory work.

'But Mrs. Jones, who always had been proud of her own family and always believed she had married beneath her, wanted him to be a gentleman in the Continental sense of the word. She kept saying they had money enough; he argued that he wasn't so much interested in money as in the work itself. He did not break with his mother because he loved her and because he kept hoping she would relent and give him enough for his experiments. But she never did. Am I making Mrs. Jones clear to you?'

Clifford nodded. He knew American women of just that type. Perhaps there were not many of them — but altogether too many.

'We had decided to keep our engagement to ourselves until Robert had won an arrangement with his mother,' Miss Graham continued. 'If he did not win that, he was going to break with his mother and go to work at anything he could get. But about two months ago he came into a legacy, not a large one, but sufficient for his plans. We decided to see his mother together and tell her of our engagement, and our intention to be married shortly. When we did so, there was a terrible scene. My people do not have a great deal of money, and make no big pretense about their position. Mrs. Jones called me a nobody, a scheming adventuress; she called me everything.

'I've got some kind of pride and some temper. My temper I lost altogether. I told her I wouldn't marry her son until she came to me on her knees and begged me to; I gave Robert back his ring; I wouldn't see him or talk to him again. He came to New York. After a few weeks I began to cool down. A week ago I came to New York to visit an aunt and I told Robert I was willing to marry him despite his mother. I then found he was in some big trouble. I do not know what it is; I have not asked him. That is all I have to say, Mr. Clifford. Robert has promised to tell you the rest, and I hope you will be able to help him and me. Goodbye.'

After he had shown out the frank-eyed, straight-speaking girl who had so instantly captured his admiration, Clifford turned to the young man. 'You are certainly to be congratulated on your fiancée, Mr. Jones.'

The thin, sensitive face had now thrown off its

restraint. It was aquiver with misery, with agonizing appeal.

'That's the trouble — she's not my fiancée!'

'What?' cried Clifford.

'I — I love her more than ever! But I'm — I'm already married!'

'Married!'

'Yes. I've been married ten days. That's my big trouble that Janet doesn't know anything of. That's what I've come to see you about: my marriage, and my — my divorce.'

'Divorce!' exclaimed the yet more startled Clifford. 'Married ten days and already after a divorce — that's speedy work even for these fast days! But I hardly see how the only son of the rich Mrs. Robert Jones could have been married ten days without the newspapers hearing of it.'

'It's been kept a close secret. Only my mother and a very few others know of it — her lawyers and a detective mother has put upon the case, a Mr. Bradley.'

'Bradley!' Clifford's sharp interest took on a yet keener edge. Was this affair going to involve him in yet another battle with his old enemy? But when Clifford spoke, his voice was controlled and stern. 'Do you think it honorable to such a fine and devoted girl as Miss Graham to let her go on believing she is engaged to you when you are actually married to some one else?'

'You're right,' choked out the young man. 'I wanted to tell her. I'm in a horrible mess, and only my mother can get me out, but mother has made it a condition of her helping me that I shall not tell Janet and not tell a soul that knows us.'

'And in the meantime Miss Graham is allowed to wonder why you don't marry her, after she's come to

you and told you she is willing. You'd better give me all the details of this secret marriage.'

As the young man poured out his narrative, so new and agonizing to him, Clifford recognized here another of the oldest of old stories; yet a story that would continue to recur so long as some young men were rich and ignorant and foolish, and some young women were artfully fascinating and artfully unscrupulous — which would be forever. In all its essentials the newspapers printed this Broadway romance every few days.

The beginning of young Jones's story was merely confirmation of the story told by Janet Graham. After his scene with his mother, and his break with Janet, he had flung away in reckless bitterness and had tried to forget his foiled desires in New York's gayety, which to most persons from other cities seems to mean the gayety and glitter of Broadway. He had had real money of his own, and through its free spending he soon knew young women, and smart men of all ages, by the score; and he had made the discovery that liquor, despite the law, flowed as plentifully as ever along Broadway for those who cared to pay the price, and for the first time in his life, incited by the good-fellowship of his new friends, he had begun to drink.

He was made welcome in all the smart night clubs. At one of these, The Pipes o' Pan, he had met Arline Carlisle, a dainty chorus girl with a few lines in a smart and popular musical production. She had confided that her gayety around public places was only a necessary professional attitude; in reality she hated it all, and was supporting a mother and three young sisters. Her smiling courage and secret self-denial prompted him to tell her about himself, his mother, his foiled love, all his affairs at home. She had thereafter become the chief figure of his Broadway existence.

Ten days before, during a lunch at which too much drink had incited him to reckless sentiment — he had really not been his normal self — he had proposed to her. There was no denying that he had asked her. She had accepted him, and somehow out of their talk had developed the idea of an immediate marriage in the sweet, quiet country far away from New York's madness — she making a condition that their marriage should be kept a secret for a time because of her theatrical contract. Accompanied by one of his new men friends, who also was a friend of Arline, a Mr. Keith Harkness, they had motored over into Connecticut and had been married by a clergyman in a small village.

Harkness, who had gallantly assumed management of the business details of the day's romance, had slipped money and a few words to the license clerk, likewise to the clergyman, and had gained the clerk's promise to conceal for a time the issuance of the license and the clergyman's promise to withhold the marriage from record. They had made a hilarious return to New York in time for Arline's evening performance, and Harkness had insisted on celebrating the event as such events should be celebrated. He had not seen Arline again that night. In fact, his last misty recollection of the night was drinking yet another toast to Arline with Harkness.

He had awakened at noon the following day alone in his hotel suite. With the black coffee he ordered sent up there came a letter. It was from Janet, the first since their break, and it was warm with love. It brought rushing upon him memory of his marriage, and he realized his folly, his terrible mistake. He cared for Arline only as a brave and spirited playmate; his love was all for Janet. He decided to put the matter of their

mistake frankly before Arline. No other course would be fair to her. She was a good fellow, she would understand. Besides, those few half-tipsy minutes before the license clerk and the clergyman comprised the whole of their relationship as husband and wife.

Arline had taken his confession very well. She was ready to abide by their marriage, but, on the other hand, she did not wish to try to hold any man against his wish. But their act could only be undone by law, and she suggested that he discuss the matter of a divorce with her lawyer after she herself had first had a talk with him.

He had seen Arline's lawyer. The lawyer had said he was merely stating Arline's proposition, but was not further acting for her in the matter. The lawyer had said that a divorce could be easily arranged and without publicity. Fortunately the marriage had been a secret one; fortunately the name of Robert Jones was a common one. Mrs. Robert Jones would go to California and after a year's residence she would quietly secure a divorce on the grounds of desertion; she would give her husband's address as New York City, so that he would never be identified as the Robert Jones of Pittsburgh. He, of course, would not contest the action, and the decree would be granted automatically and without attracting the slightest attention.

Naturally there would have to be terms. Mrs. Jones would have to be compensated for the loss of a year's time, and her expenses would have to be paid. Her terms would be an immediate cash payment, upon coming to an agreement and before she started for California, of two hundred thousand dollars as a guarantee of good faith, plus fifty thousand dollars for living and legal expenses; and seven hundred and fifty thousand more at once to be placed in escrow and

automatically to become hers on the granting of the divorce decree.

A million dollars! Young Jones had been appalled at this cost of his brief romantic drive into the country. Upon his own resources he could not raise a small fraction of this sum. He had frantically tried to see Arline for a talk, but Arline was always out. He had then wired his mother to come immediately to New York, and to her he had told the whole of his predicament. She had been horrified: a chorus girl, and perhaps worse, for her daughter-in-law! For her the affair had just one redeeming feature: the marriage, involving her personal shame, was a secret and the whole disgraceful affair could be kept a secret. She had hurried to her lawyers. After prompt investigation and deliberation, they had advised her that the proposal presented by Arline's lawyer was probably the best settlement that could be effected if Mrs. Jones insisted upon avoiding publicity.

Mrs. Jones would not have publicity. Anything rather than public humiliation. At the same time she did not like to hand over a million dollars. Her lawyers had then suggested that her only remaining chance was that a good detective might turn up something which might help her, and had recommended Bradley as the best man for the undertaking, on the strength of his having once been Chief of New York's detective force. Bradley had accordingly been called in; he had held out hopes; Mrs. Jones had been greatly impressed by him. But the day before Bradley had admitted that, although he still had a remote hope, his investigations had revealed nothing helpful, and regretfully he also had advised the acceptance of Arline's terms, since Mrs. Jones's foremost desire was the avoidance of publicity. Mrs. Jones had all but yielded, and then that morning

had come those two compelling, anonymous letters about Clifford.

'Don't you see the awful mess I've made of things!' cried the agonized young man, in conclusion. 'I mean for Janet — and myself! What mother is doing is chiefly to avoid scandal; it won't really help me at all! I mean with Janet. Janet, thinking we're still engaged, is now wondering at my strange behavior toward her. And during the year it will take for the divorce she'll wonder even more, for during that year I can't say a word about love or marriage to her! Oh, but I'm a miserable rotter! And when I am free to speak of marriage — if I haven't lost her in the meantime — of course I'll then tell her the truth. And when Janet learns that while I was really engaged to her, I apparently forgot her and married another woman, kept it secret and got a secret divorce — when I tell her all that, can't you see how she'll take it? She'll despise me for the way I've behaved. She'll loathe me as the bought-off leavings of another woman. She's terribly sensitive, and terribly proud. It will almost kill her, for she trusts me, believes in me, and — and loves me. Don't you see, Mr. Clifford, it's Janet I'm thinking most about — Janet, and what we might have meant to each other if this awful thing hadn't happened? Don't you see?'

'I see,' said Clifford. He warmed with a human desire to save, if possible, the romance between young Jones and that fine, straight-gazing Janet Graham. . . . Yes, unless he guessed wrong, here was fundamentally the oldest of all old Broadway stories, but with new twists of masterly adroitness. However, he told young Jones nothing of his conjecture.

'I'll do what I can for you,' said Clifford, 'but it must be upon the understanding that I am to handle the affair entirely according to my own judgment.'

'Yes — yes,' agreed young Jones.

'Then, first of all, if you can arrange it, I'd like to meet your wife of ten days.'

'That will be easy. I'm to see her in an hour and a half. She asked me to lunch with her. For some reason she has been willing enough to meet me these last few days. Come with me; I'll introduce you under some other name, as one of my Pittsburgh friends.'

'Introduce me under my own name,' Clifford ordered dryly. 'Unless I'm mistaken your wife will very quickly learn the truth about me, anyhow.'

Clifford made two further requests: to meet the mother, and to meet her lawyers. These meetings were both promptly arranged for.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BROADWAY BRIDE

FIRST Clifford went to Mrs. Jones's lawyers, a most reputable firm, and had a long conference with the senior partner. Mr. Gordon explained that legally he was helpless. He detailed several courses he might take were it not for Mrs. Jones's insistence that there be no publicity; that insistence prohibited all open legal action. There was nothing any lawyer could do under the prohibitive circumstances, and no honest lawyer who cared for his standing would undertake to secure relief. Therefore, considering Mrs. Jones's unchanging attitude toward publicity, her best course seemed to be to accept the proposal submitted her and take her chances with the outcome.

Clifford left the lawyer with a deepening of his conviction that before him was an almost flawless example of the great Broadway game. Intricate, careful advance planning and shrewdest brains were here.

Half an hour later, in the promenade of the Biltmore, Clifford was acknowledging young Jones's introduction to his mother. Clifford's quick estimate of Mrs. Jones almost coincided with the judgment of Janet Graham: a perfect American type of the first generation of social success, handsome, self-centered, proud of her position, but none too sure of it, her life shaped by constant thought of what her world would say. She tried to be composed and superior, but Clifford read the frantic tensity beneath her calmness.

He strolled aside with Mrs. Jones. 'You've heard Robert's story?' she breathed. 'Can you do anything?'

He realized that he could do nothing with this domineering woman unless he immediately seized the upper hand. To gain this end he was justified in being brutal, ruthless.

'I may possibly do something if you do not mess things up any further,' he said in a hard voice, his cold eyes held straight into hers.

'What!' she gasped in amazed indignation.

'You are directly responsible for this present mess,' he went on. 'If you were the only person concerned, I'd be glad to have you forced to give up a million, and I'd be glad to have this scandal spread on every first page in the country. You fully deserve all the loss and the shame and the suffering that might possibly develop out of this situation.'

She was haughtily furious. 'I'm not accustomed to such talk!' she cried.

'Then it's time you became accustomed! If your selfish, snobbish pride hadn't balked your son's ambitions, if you hadn't arbitrarily come between your son and Miss Graham, this marriage would never have taken place. I dare say you're proud of what you've done!'

'I won't stand — I won't stand —'

'Oh, yes, you will stand it!' Clifford interrupted. 'And you'll stand a lot more plain talk if I feel like giving it to you. Your lawyers haven't helped you. Mr. Bradley hasn't helped you. There's a chance that I may help you. Remember, you are about to lose a million. But I'll try to help you save that million and your family name only on the basis of your behaving yourself and your doing exactly what I tell you to do.'

She gasped, she glared. But a million is something worth keeping one's temper for. And also is the avoidance of a scandal.

'What do you want me to do?'

'At present just one thing. You are on the point of settling with your daughter-in-law. We must delay settlement, for I need time in which to work. These people will not settle until you put up the money; therefore I must say, and you must support me in this excuse, that you are having difficulty in raising a million in cash. That's a plausible reason; the richest person may find it mighty hard to raise a million in ready money in a short time. Well, how about it?'

'I'll — I'll do as you say,' she choked out.

'Thank you. For the rest, keep absolutely out of this affair. I wish you a very good morning.' And having insulted her to the best of his ability, Clifford bowed and left her.

At one o'clock Clifford and young Jones paused momentarily in the main entrance of the dining-room of the Grantham, while Jones made a swift survey of the tables.

'There she is, at that fifth table along the wall,' said Jones. 'Why, she has a friend with her, a Miss Regan.'

Clifford had already noted Mary. His heart surged with its old bitterness at sight of her, but he controlled his expression.

'It so happens that I have met Miss Regan,' he remarked. 'Have you known her long?'

'I was introduced to her at The Pipes o' Pan. I used to see her there often. She seems to be one of Arline's close friends. It slipped my mind while I was talking in your office, but she is another person who knows of our marriage.'

They crossed to the table. Mary gave Clifford a cool, distant look. On the other hand, young Mrs. Jones was apparently delighted to meet him, and with a pretty girlish gesture of welcome held out to him her left hand.

During the luncheon she and Clifford did most of the talking, but this did not interfere with Clifford's study of her. She was a soft, slight little blonde, undeniably pretty, undeniably appealing, undeniably disarming in her chatter which was largely questions and gratitude for answers. She looked a naïve twenty; Clifford guessed her to be a wise twenty-seven. Almost any very young man temporarily unbalanced, Clifford thought, would find her frank, appealing personality irresistible.

At two o'clock young Mrs. Jones — she used her old name of Arline Carlisle — after asking Clifford to call upon her, excused herself and drew away her husband, saying he had promised to escort her to her matinée performance. Mary would have left at the same time, but a quiet request from Clifford caused her to remain. Clifford gazed across at this mysterious, baffling secret wife of his. He knew that in this affair of young Jones there was no use of pretense with Mary. She already knew his part, or would soon know it; this was a game that had to be played with practically all cards face upward.

'I know about the marriage of those two,' he said abruptly, his voice vibrant with bitterness and accusation. 'The oldest, the richest, the safest of all Broadway games! You know what this game is as well as I do — forcing a man into a foolish action, and then making him pay for his folly!'

'So you really think this present affair is such a game?' she returned quietly.

'I don't think it — I know it. Young Jones is a victim of the grand Broadway emotional frame-up — only he doesn't know it yet. And *you* — you were and are in it! Perhaps you were a figure of the alluring background — perhaps you helped gain necessary facts about young Jones and his mother — perhaps you are

helping direct this Arline in her rôle. I don't know just what your part is, but you certainly are in it — big!'

She did not reply. He went on.

'That Arline Carlisle didn't work this situation out. She's just acting her rôle as ordered. Big brains are behind this game. Shall I tell you whose the brains are? I guess you know. Bradley's!'

'And you really think Mr. Bradley planned all this?' her slow voice inquired mockingly.

'The rich opportunity, carefully planned — his only apparent connection with the matter being that of a detective trying to solve the case — why, the whole situation smells of Bradley! It's the biggest and smoothest and most nearly perfect stunt Bradley has yet doped out!'

'And you, I suppose,' queried the taunting voice, 'are once more going to try to catch Mr. Bradley in his own trap?'

The tide of bitterness surged yet higher against this perverse wife of his who had allied herself with his old enemy. Again Clifford felt the uselessness of trying to hide his purpose from her. Besides, he wanted to strike the soul of her, if there were a soul to strike.

'I'm going to do my best,' he declared harshly. 'And I'm going to try to block you!'

'Thanks for your warning to me,' she returned. 'As for your warning to Mr. Bradley, if you wish you may deliver it to him in person, for he was to call for me here at half-past two. It is now exactly that time.'

She rose and started out. Clifford followed her. Sure enough, Bradley was waiting in a quiet corner of the lounge. He stood up as they approached.

'So, Mary, you've picked up our old friend Clifford,' he remarked. 'Happened to meet Jones and his young wife on my way here, Clifford, and from a few words

that were dropped I gather that you are going to help me help him out of the little trouble he's fallen into.'

'The trouble you planned and drew him into!' Clifford flung back.

'So you're again having your old brain-storm — that I'm behind every one's trouble.' Bradley's voice was easy, his lips smiled; but a mocking challenge glittered in his dark eyes. 'I was hoping for once, Clifford, you and I were going to work pleasantly together on a case.'

'The case being a million-dollar hold-up by you!'

Bradley's manner did not deny this accusation. In fact, his smiling eyes coolly admitted it. That was one quality in Bradley that had always compelled Clifford's reluctant admiration: the almost magnificent audacity of the man.

'You do me great wrong, Clifford,' Bradley mourned with his mocking smile. 'The elder Mrs. Jones has paid me a retainer of five thousand, and I am to have ten thousand if I handle her case so that she is saved from the extortionate demand made upon her and also save her from publicity.' His taunting eyes frankly belied his next words. 'And that's all there is in the case for me.'

'You're welcome to your fees, but you'll not get that million!' Clifford declared.

'No? And you are going to stop me. Well, we shall see, my dear boy — we shall see. Mary, I think we'd best be going.'

With a careless nod at Clifford, Bradley moved away with Mary. Clifford gazed at them, particularly at Mary, with a rage that was hot yet impotent. To think that Mary should choose to affiliate herself with a man she knew to be a great and ruthless rogue rather than with himself — and at the same time bind him to secrecy concerning their marriage!

CHAPTER XXIII

CONFUSING CLUES

CLIFFORD spent the afternoon in concentrated thinking upon the situation. His knowledge of life told him once again that these sensational romances, so beloved by newspapers, between rich young men and beautiful but obscure young women — Cinderella and her Prince, the Beggar Maid and her King Cophetua — were often not so much prompted by youth's impetuous fire as by age's shrewd design. Whatever the romance-hungry public might think, these transactions constituted a great business: a cunning capitalization and exploitation of the emotions and follies of moneyed youth.

Clifford tried mentally to peer behind the scenes of this present affair, to figure out the exact working conditions of the scheme. Bradley was playing for a million. The way the game was planned, that million went first into the hands of Arline. If the marriage were, as represented, merely an impetuous and unpremeditated affair, the ordinary *mésalliance*, then Arline could and would keep the million for herself. But Bradley never went into a scheme in which a person could so easily double-cross him. Therefore, Arline did not dare to double-cross him. That meant that Bradley had something so big on Arline that she was afraid not to follow his directions.

What was this big something which made Bradley feel safe in trusting Arline Carlisle with a million?

That question seemed to Clifford to offer the best line of attack. If Bradley's plan had any weak spot, that spot was undoubtedly Arline. Therefore, Arline

was his own best lead. That big hidden something, if he could learn what it was, might make Arline more afraid of him than of Bradley.

He instantly started an investigation of Arline, making deft inquiries himself and through subordinates. Luck was with him. By evening he had a faint clue, and a wild hunch. Both had to do with a pearl necklace belonging to Lorna Gale, the star of 'Break o' Day,' the musical play in which Arline Carlisle was appearing. That night Clifford dined with Detective Sergeant Jimmie Kelly, and to him he outlined the Jones-Carlisle situation, and inquired as to the attitude of the police toward the theft of Lorna Gale's necklace.

'At first we thought the whole thing phoney,' said Jimmie. 'Fake pearls, fake theft — old press-agent stuff. But we know better now. It was a real theft, and the pearls were not only real, but famous. Cost Lorna Gale a hundred thousand. They belonged to Mrs. Atterbury whose husband went broke back in '21. Not a clue to the thief.'

'And the thief, if caught, would get a hundred years or so for a theft like that — eh, Jimmie?'

'Just about. What's the idea?'

'I picked up a whisper — it came pretty straight — that Arline Carlisle might have been connected with the theft. If she should really be the thief, and Bradley should know it, wouldn't that give him just the hold upon Arline necessary for present purposes?'

'I should say so! But, great Heavens, Bob —'

'Oh, I admit that I may only be playing a wild hunch. But if I can solve the mystery of those stolen pearls, I think I can use it to bring out the truth about this Jones-Carlisle marriage. Anyhow, those pearls are my first job.'

'I get you. And you can count on me to back your play.'

'Then I wish you'd dig up what you can about the pretty Arline. Also about a certain Keith Harkness, a friend of hers and young Jones, and one of the witnesses to the marriage. And I wish you'd hang around as much as you can, for if there are any arrests I'd like to have you make them.'

To this Jimmie agreed. Late the following morning, by appointment, Clifford was talking with the dazzling Lorna Gale in her hotel. She showed him a photograph of the famous rope necklace, and he made a mental print of it. If ever he came across those pearls, he was sure he would know them.

'Miss Gale,' he said, 'I'm going to try to find your pearls. I'd like to make a bargain with you: that is, if I find and return the pearls, you agree not to prosecute the thief.'

'I promise. All I care about is the return of the necklace.'

Clifford went away well pleased with this arrangement. If he found the pearls, he could offer Arline immunity in return for siding with him; whereas Bradley's hold upon her was the fear of imprisonment. His would be the better hold. That is, of course, if his conjecture about Arline and the pearls was correct.

But important as pearls had become in Clifford's mind, there was another possibility he did not overlook — that the marriage in some way might not be valid. That afternoon, in company with young Jones, he motored over into Connecticut to the scene of the marriage. At the county court-house the license clerk and Jones promptly identified each other; the records showed the proper issuance of a license. At a drab little parsonage a spare old housekeeper, the second witness, also identified Jones, and the Reverend Mr. Masters, a pale and spectacled young man of very

earnest bearing, acknowledged having performed the ceremony and with smiling apology which showed his sympathy for romance substantiated Jones's story that he was temporarily holding the marriage back from record upon the request of all parties concerned. Investigation in the village brought out that the housekeeper had always lived in the town and was of irreproachable reputation; that the little church housed an independent congregation which was very poor; that the Reverend Mr. Masters was a recent divinity graduate — the congregation could not afford the services of an experienced clergyman — and had come to them three weeks before with the best of recommendations and had proved himself an eloquent and devoted pastor.

The possibility of a flaw in the marriage seemed thus to be definitely eliminated. At dinner that night Jimmie Kelly had nothing new to report concerning Arline Carlisle. As for Keith Harkness, friend to Arline and young Jones, Jimmie reported that he was comparatively a newcomer to the city. He was in the office of a reputable broker; apparently had an independent fortune; and the night life of New York was as new and as alluring an adventure to him as it had been to young Jones — which tie of a fresh common interest was probably what had drawn the two young men into friendship.

The following day Clifford concentrated on Arline and the stolen pearls. He remembered Arline's gay invitation to call. Perhaps a visit to her in her home might yield some fact or some more definite idea; so at five o'clock he was ringing the bell of her apartment. Arline herself admitted him. Mary Regan was there, which did not surprise him; but after the barest exchange of greeting she left. He tried to keep her out of his mind for the present.

Arline talked readily enough, with a naïve, pretty manner of taking Clifford into her confidence. She granted Clifford's request for an extension of time in the matter of the Jones settlement.

'But I can't make it later than a week from Saturday night,' she explained. 'My show ends its season that night. It's had a long run and this summer has been beastly hot, and I want to get out of town right after the last performance.'

'We may want until the last hour you have given us, which will be midnight.'

To this she agreed, since midnight would be the very earliest she could get away. She then turned her talk to her marriage.

'I know you think I tricked Bobbie Jones into marrying me,' she said with her pretty sophisticated frankness. 'But I want you to know that's not so. I married him in good faith, because he asked me and because I liked him. I knew at the time he had no money. And I'm willing to have our marriage stand on that basis, the two of us trying to make the best of our married life. But since Bobbie doesn't want it that way, and his mother won't have it that way — well, why shouldn't I be a bit of a gold-digger? Remember that on the stage, if a girl hasn't talent or a pull — and I haven't either — the girl doesn't get very much out of it, and she's got to look for her big chance elsewhere. This is my big chance,' she ended prettily, 'and I don't think I should pass it up. I hope you understand, for I believe we will settle things easier if you really do understand me.'

'I believe I really do understand you,' said Clifford, perhaps somewhat cryptically.

She chatted on in further self-extenuation. Clifford kept up his end, but all the while he was studying Ar-

line and the apartment. The small apartment was undoubtedly rented furnished, so its fittings told him nothing. But a yawning bag of silver mesh, its contents half-spilled upon the table, a pair of gloves upon a chair, a crumpled handkerchief upon the mantelpiece, ragged envelopes on her desk obviously opened by a forefinger used as a paper-knife, were all indications of one quality of her character: she was obviously careless, always in a hurry. Clifford wondered if, with all the intriguing hardness he sensed in her, there might not be something very simple and human at the bottom of the naïve, sophisticated creature.

At last she said: 'Now that's all the business we're going to talk to-day. I'll get us some tea — and perhaps something else.'

She disappeared, and when he heard sounds from the kitchen Clifford looked eagerly at the little wall safe he had noted while they had talked. Could the pearls, if Arline had them, be in that safe? But there was no time to test its combination. His eyes fell to that other common container of valuables, the bag upon the table. Instinctively his hand went through its silver-mounted throat, and swiftly brought forth its contents. He found nothing of significance until he came upon a bit of folded paper. Unfolded, that bit of paper proved to be a pawn-ticket for two pearls. He stood for a moment in thrilled indecision; then thrust the ticket back into the silver bag.

When Clifford left fifteen minutes later, he was exultant. He had been entirely right in his conjecture of what had happened behind the scenes. Arline had, indeed, stolen Lorna Gale's pearls! Bradley's knowledge of this theft was, indeed, the weapon he was using to force Arline to do his will!

While that pawn-ticket was to Clifford full proof of

this, he realized that it was not sufficient legal evidence and that its use would help him in his purpose but little. Only the pearls themselves and their unexpected use would serve. His first job was now more than ever to find the pearls and find them in Arline's possession.

Where were the pearls? Arline's little wall safe intrigued him, and that night, again using 'Key-Ring Harry,' former flat-burglar and a locksmith with genius, he went through that safe and searched Arline's apartment, but found not a thing of significance to him. He was disappointed, but not one bit altered in his conviction. Arline had the pearls, but she had them some place else. Some day she would have them in her possession — most likely before she left the city on the closing of her play. Clifford decided that the care in watching her should be redoubled.

This programme Clifford adhered to in the days that followed. These days were all the more trying because, in trying to save the romance of young Jones and Janet Graham, he was constantly gazing upon the wreck of his own romance. Every day he saw Mary Regan in the company of Arline Carlisle. Mary had the manner of being just a good friend to Arline, but his every sense persisted in telling him that in reality Mary was Bradley's watch-dog, that she was Arline's stage director whose chief duty was to see that Arline made no slip.

His bitterness toward Mary almost passed the limits of his endurance. At times he was almost impelled, as a means of upsetting her designs and ending her alliance with Bradley, to go to the latter and tell his enemy that Mary was his wife. But before such impulse could develop into action, Clifford's blind promise to Mary of silence always checked him. And he was

checked by yet another reason: Bradley was gloating over the belief that he had won Clifford's sweetheart away from him; he would gloat even more if told it was really Clifford's wife that he had won.

The solution to this affair had seemed obvious, if not easy, to Clifford. But it was proving the exact opposite. As the days passed, he learned, despite all his many efforts, only one additional thing: a vague rumor that Harkness might have in some way been connected with Arline in the theft of the pearls. The whole complicated thing became maddening to Clifford. He was sure he was right about Arline's rôle, and also Mary's. And he knew he was right about Bradley. But he seemed utterly unable to break through Bradley's cunningly prepared defenses, and without concrete and provable evidence an open fight would be useless. Of all Bradley's many devious plans to gain folly's gold, Clifford conceded this to be Bradley's masterpiece.

His impending personal failure was made the harder to bear by young Jones, who came daily as an agonized suppliant for news, and to whom he had no news to give; and by Janet Graham, unsuspicious, bewildered love in her eyes, who came to him daily in eager hope and whom he had to send away in drooping fear and suspense.

The final Saturday came, and Clifford was still without real evidence. Mrs. Jones was frantically desirous of settlement upon Arline's terms, and Clifford could not gainsay her. But in desperate hope he insisted that they should delay until the last allowable hour. So the time for settlement was fixed for half-past eleven that night, when Arline would be through with her final performance; the place was to be Mrs. Jones's suite. Mrs. Jones was to have ready her certi-

fied check for a quarter of a million to meet the first payment. With ironical courtesy Bradley insisted that Clifford be master of ceremonies.

But if he could not balk Bradley, there remained one measure by which he could gain some protection for Mrs. Jones: a measure which had developed from his talk with Mrs. Jones's lawyer. At half-past five, by appointment, Clifford was a second time in Arline's apartment. Mary Regan was there, but promptly withdrew into the rear of the tiny establishment. Two trunks and two large bags stood open, all but packed. Arline explained that she was not coming back to her rooms after the closing performance, but was starting for Rochester to visit a sister immediately after the settlement. Mary Regan was there to help her pack and was going to see her off on her train.

'I'm very glad you're here, Mr. Clifford,' Arline continued. 'I'd have 'phoned you to come if you hadn't called me up. I wanted to know just what the formalities for to-night will be, for I want to be prepared. I hope they will be brief.'

'Very brief. Merely a certified check to you, and in return a couple of documents from you.'

'Documents from me? What for?'

'If you were paid, and gave nothing in return,' Clifford explained dryly, 'you could, if you wished, refuse to get a divorce and the case would be just where it now is. You'd be a quarter of a million ahead, and you'd be in a situation to force further preliminary payments out of Mrs. Jones.'

'I see. What are the documents?'

'First, this letter from you to Mrs. Jones.' Clifford handed her a typewritten sheet. 'In this letter you suggest that, since your marriage does not meet with her approval, you are willing to get a divorce upon the

terms already discussed, and you state the terms. I want you to copy the letter in your own hand.'

'And the other document?'

Clifford handed her a second sheet. 'This is merely a receipt acknowledging the first payment of two hundred and fifty thousand against the total sum of one million you are to be paid in return for getting a divorce. Neither document is strictly legal. But if there should be any attempt to evade the terms of this agreement, and the affair should come into the open, these two documents might be of some protection to Mrs. Jones in court. This is no more than fair.'

'Very well. I agree to both. Is there anything else?'

'One small item. I do not doubt your marriage to Mr. Jones, but since it has not yet been recorded I have only partial legal proof of it. I therefore ask that you bring the marriage certificate given you by the clergyman, Mr. Masters. This is a mere formality.'

'Certainly.' She stood up. 'I'm so rushed that this is the best time for me to copy the letter for you. Please wait for a minute or two so you can see whether I have it just right. Things are in such a mess here that I'll slip into my bedroom to write it.'

When she had gone, Clifford glanced swiftly at the open trunks and bags. He wished he had the chance to go through them; this pretty bird, all poised for flight, had undoubtedly collected from their secret hiding-places all her most valuable belongings.

And then his eyes noted the bag of silver mesh upon her table, and only by a great effort did he hold back a startled cry. From the slit of its barely opened mouth hung three white beads. Swiftly, noiselessly he crossed to the table, and the next moment was gazing at the great heap of lustrous globules in his hand. The famous pearls of Miss Gale — formerly the pearls of

Mrs. Atterbury — there could be no doubt of it! Found at the last minute — found just in time!

For an instant Clifford was utterly bewildered by his amazing discovery. Then his mind recovered and raced ahead to consider his course of action. Should he confront Arline right here, force the truth out of her? No. She might get word to Bradley, and that might spoil everything. Better to save his discovery till the conference of that night, when he would be prepared, then spring the pearls suddenly upon the unexpecting group. That was his best chance, that would force out the maximum of truth. In the meantime the pearls would be safe with Arline; she was now plainly keeping them constantly with her for that night's getaway.

He was starting to return the pearls to the silver bag when a voice sounded sharply behind him.

'What are you doing there?'

He turned, the pearls still in his hand. Mary Regan was regarding him, with cold accusation. His wits served him well and he managed to speak naturally.

'I chanced to knock Miss Carlisle's bag from the table, and these pearls fell from it. Rather good, don't you think, for stage jewels?'

'Miss Carlisle told me she bought them at the auction sale of Geraldine Farrar's opera costumes,' said Mary.

Just then Arline came in, gently waving the letter to dry it. Clifford thought she started and went wide-eyed at sight of the pearls he still was holding. In his best unsuspecting voice he apologized for his awkwardness in spilling the bag, and remarked:

'I was just saying to Miss Regan that they were extremely good for stage pearls.'

Arline's composure returned. Clifford examined the

letter she had copied, approved of it, and took his leave. His quickness of wit had saved this last situation. All his inner self was singing with triumph. Neither Mary nor Arline had suspected that he knew the truth about those 'stage jewels'; and Arline, not suspecting, would continue to keep the pearls beside her.

At last he had positive evidence of what was Bradley's hold upon Arline! And he, at the proper moment, would twist that hold to his own use!

For the next few hours Clifford was busy revising his plans for the conference of that night. Of all concerned, only to Jimmie Kelly did he confide the whole of his design. Jimmie's specific duty was simple; he was to arrest Harkness on the nominal charge of bootlegging and be outside Mrs. Jones's suite at the appointed hour within hearing of Clifford's voice.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WORLD GOES WRONG

At half-past eleven, in Mrs. Jones's suite, the stage was all set, the players all in place, for what Clifford was going to try to make the final act in this Broadway romance. Clifford himself was not wholly certain of the outcome of the act, particularly what might be the astute Bradley's situation at the fall of the curtain. But he was certain what was going to be his method for bringing on the dénouement. He was going unexpectedly to force every hidden card to be laid face upward upon the table, and the finale would be determined by what these cards revealed.

A few minutes earlier Clifford and Bradley had met in the hotel lobby. There had been triumph in Bradley's black eyes.

'Let me say once more, Clifford, that it has for once been a pleasure to have worked on the same side with you.' The *camaraderie* of his tone was really open mockery. 'And it helps let me down easily in my failure that so clever a man as you has also failed. Yes, I'm mighty glad that you've been in on this. And for once I'm really glad to occupy a back seat.'

'I get your point,' Clifford had dully said, his face revealing nothing of his own near triumph.

And now at the table in Mrs. Jones's sitting-room Bradley really did modestly sit a little back from the others. About the table sat Mrs. Jones, her son, the young Mrs. Jones, Mary Regan, and Clifford in the position of chairman. Unknown to this party, in a closet opening off the little hallway where Clifford had

deftly smuggled her and where words would reach her through the open transom of the sitting-room, there was still another character of this drama — Janet Graham: for Clifford had decided that the possibilities of his clearing up every phase of this involved case would be increased if Janet Graham should suddenly learn at first-hand all that had been hidden from her.

'Let's get this affair settled as briefly as possible,' said Mrs. Jones. 'That is, Mr. Bradley, unless you have just learned that something you said you hoped you might learn which might make a different kind of arrangement possible.'

'I might have learned something if I had had more time,' returned Bradley with polite regret. 'But the ultimatum of young Mrs. Jones has wiped out that possibility.'

'Then proceed, Mr. Clifford,' Mrs. Jones requested.

All eyes turned on Clifford. He had already managed to feel that bag of silver mesh which Arline Carlisle still carried; as he had expected, the pearls were there. Taking his time, and giving no hint of the bomb he was about to explode, he glanced at the three conspirators: Bradley and Arline Carlisle were waiting in easy confidence; Mary Regan's face seemed at that moment oddly strange to him — tense and white, full of strained expectancy.

The moment for his dénouement had come.

'Before taking up the settlement,' Clifford began with slow, driving emphasis, 'I think it might be well for us all to understand why this present settlement is necessary. There is a certain man in this city — a powerful, cunning man with shrewd, far-planning, ruthless brains — who has developed the highly specialized and enormously profitable business of turning to his advantage the follies and mistakes of people

who have money. And where follies and mistakes do not exist ready-made to his hand, he adroitly creates them. This very clever gentleman is now sitting across the table. His name is Bradley.'

Bradley's dark eyes narrowed, but he said no word.

'Bradley sees or creates the opportunities and makes the plans,' continued Clifford, 'but he carefully works from behind the scenes. Usually the real work is carried out by some person in his power who dares not refuse to do his bidding. Mrs. Jones, Mr. Jones, that is the present situation. You are both the victims of one of his plots, and Miss Carlisle has been his instrument.'

'It's not — not so!' breathed Arline Carlisle.

'My God!' exclaimed young Jones, staring.

'Cut out the crazy melodrama,' growled Bradley, 'and let's get down to the real stuff!'

'That's what we're getting at, Bradley — the real stuff! Mrs. Jones, here is how Bradley worked this game, and I'll quickly prove it. Bradley has agents everywhere looking out for his sort of chances. When your son, in his reckless mood, landed on Broadway, his agents quickly learned all about him and you. Bradley saw here a great opportunity if the affair were properly handled. He decided that he could make most money by marrying your son to a woman of whom you'd disapprove: one you would so violently object to that you'd pay a fortune to get rid of her. But for his plan he required a young woman who would turn your money over to him: in other words, one on whom he had so great a hold that she would not dare disobey him. He had such a hold on Arline Carlisle. Therefore, he picked Arline Carlisle for the job, and ordered her to marry your son. She is clever, and under his directions turned the trick. There, Mrs. Jones, is exactly how all of you got into this situation — exactly

how your son happens to have Arline Carlisle for his wife.'

Before any of the others could speak, the hall door opened and straight across the room and to the table walked Janet Graham. Her face was drained of blood.

'Robert,' she breathed, in a dying voice, 'so — so that's your trouble — you're already married!'

Young Jones had come springing in agony to his feet. 'Janet — I wanted to tell you — oh, God —'

'You shouldn't regard your trouble as a trouble,' interrupted the dying voice of Janet Graham. 'I think your — your wife is very pretty. And — and I hope you'll be happy. Good-bye.'

She turned away. 'Janet!' the young man cried. But she kept on for the door and would have gone out except for Clifford.

'Wait, Miss Graham,' he commanded. 'You have only heard part of what I got you here to learn. I want you here to learn at first-hand that Robert Jones had not forgotten you, that he had not stopped loving you, but was the victim of a carefully planned trick. Take that chair.'

Like an automaton Miss Graham sank into the chair Clifford indicated.

'And now for the hold Bradley had upon Miss Carlisle,' Clifford continued to the others. Suddenly he seized Arline's bag, and the next instant was holding out the softly iridescent strands of pearls. There were several gasps. 'These pearls represent Bradley's hold upon Miss Carlisle,' Clifford drove on. 'Miss Carlisle stole them from Miss Gale. Bradley secretly learned of this, and threatened her with arrest and a long prison term unless she did as he dictated, marrying young Mr. Jones and turning over the fortune gained from the marriage. In fear of Bradley, she obeyed. In return

she was to be allowed to keep the pearls, and was perhaps to have a part of the divorce settlement.'

Clifford caught Arline's shoulder, his eyes in hard triumph on Bradley, who glowered back on him.

'I've got the goods on you, Miss Carlisle!' he snapped at her. 'But I'm not after you chiefly — I'm after Bradley. Your only chance is to come through with all you know about Bradley's part in this scheme. The way matters now stand, Bradley cannot keep you out of prison. I'm the only one who can help you. And I'll help you only if you come through with the whole truth.'

'I've got nothing to say,' Arline returned defiantly.

'No? We'll soon see as to that. Jimmie!'

Through the hall door walked Jimmie Kelly, a hand on the elbow of Mr. Keith Harkness. On Harkness's appearance, Arline could not repress a slight start.

'Mr. Harkness,' Clifford explained to the group, 'is suspected of being connected with this pearl theft.' He stepped to Mrs. Jones's bedroom door and opened it. 'Kindly step in, Miss Gale.'

The star of 'Break o' Day' entered.

'Miss Gale, do you identify these as your pearls?' inquired Clifford.

'I do,' said Lorna Gale.

'These stolen pearls, Miss Gale, were just now found in the possession of Miss Carlisle.' Clifford turned again to Arline; he knew he now had the situation in full control. 'You see we've got you dead to rights,' he drove at Arline again. 'Come through with the whole story. That's your only chance now. Come through — and I'll guarantee you immunity.'

In grim exultation Clifford waited for the trapped girl to pour out her confession. A minute passed. Then Arline turned toward Miss Gale.

'Don't I get immunity, anyhow, Lorna? Doesn't our original bargain hold good?'

'Of course, Arline.'

'What's that?' demanded Clifford sharply.

'I'm sorry I fibbed to you about that offer of immunity, Mr. Clifford,' apologized Miss Gale. 'But I'd promised to keep suspicion away from the stunt until our show had closed.'

'Stunt?' echoed Clifford.

'Publicity stunt,' Miss Gale explained. 'Our show needed publicity, and I had those real pearls. The stolen jewel stunt is such an old one that it seemed just as good as new. I think it really did help our show. There was no theft, but the appearances were first-class. I gave the pearls to Arline to put in her safe-deposit box, and to-night she was to give them back to me.'

To Clifford it seemed that the whole world had suddenly dropped from beneath him and that he was falling into infinity. Through the whirling daze he caught a mocking grin on Bradley's face.

'I suppose you got your publicity idea from Mr. Bradley?' he managed to say.

'I believe Mr. Bradley did first suggest it,' replied Miss Gale.

Clifford saw it all now. Those pearls had been one element of Bradley's intricate plan. Bradley had himself adroitly handed this clue to Clifford — had deftly arranged so that the pearls should seem to Clifford his best clue — had kept his attention eagerly fixed upon this false clue until the last moment: this to prevent him searching out the real clue until it was too late. Even in his sickening sense of swift defeat, Clifford had to admit that the device was clever — that Bradley was diabolically clever.

'It seems that I was wrong about these pearls,' Clifford managed to get out, 'but everything else I've said about this affair being a frame-up is the truth.' He handed the necklace to its owner. 'We'll not be needing you any further, Miss Gale, so you may go.'

After the actress and her pearls were through the door, Bradley spoke up, his eyes glittering at Clifford in veiled mockery.

'Now that Mr. Clifford has this bit of melodrama out of his system, I suppose he is ready to go ahead with the real business of the evening.'

'Yes,' said Clifford, still dazed with the sense that he had been outwitted, had lost everything. Automatically he looked at the three persons in whom he was most concerned: at the height of his denunciatory exposé, he had seen wild hope in the faces of young Jones and Janet Graham; now the faces of both were dead with disappointment. But the white face of Mary Regan was unchanged: it was still charged with the strained expectancy that had seemed to him so strange from the first.

Clifford slowly drew out the certified check which Mrs. Jones had given him. 'Here is your quarter of a million, Miss Carlisle,' he said dryly. 'Let me examine the documents I asked you for, and then we will make the exchange. First the letter.'

She handed this to him, and he read it through. It was in perfect form.

'And now your marriage certificate, please.'

She gave him a long slender envelope of thick bond paper. He drew out the certificate, and began perfunctorily to examine it. Then, in a second, a new world leaped into existence within Clifford.

'My God — of all things! And how — how? — did this get here?'

CHAPTER XXV

THE WORLD GOES RIGHT

'ANYTHING wrong?' demanded Bradley sharply, eyeing Clifford suspiciously.

'Everything is quite all right,' Clifford assured him, controlling himself outwardly, though inwardly he was reeling. 'Now, Miss Carlisle, you'll get your money if you will just sign this receipt. By the way, I suppose Arline Carlisle was your legal and documentary name before your marriage the other day in Connecticut?'

'It was.'

She took the receipt. As she was signing it, Clifford turned to Mr. Harkness.

'I forgot to beg your pardon for suspecting you in the matter of those pearls, Mr. Harkness, and I want to set things right for you at Headquarters if I have started any trouble for you. I believe I got your name correctly: Mr. Keith Harkness, is it not?'

'Keith Harkness, yes. And you may tell Headquarters that it has never been anything else.'

Clifford took the receipt from Arline, glanced at it, and put it in his pocket with her letter proposing this settlement. Then he handed her the check. This she folded and slipped into her bag.

That instant Clifford clicked a pair of nickel bracelets upon her wrists. 'Jimmie,' he snapped, 'put the cuffs on your man!' Within the same instant nickel handcuffs were also upon Keith Harkness.

'Why — why —' began Arline gaspingly, but was drowned out by Bradley, who came to his feet with a roar.

'Clifford — what's the meaning of this last wild stunt?'

'It means that Arline Carlisle is under arrest for bigamy and swindling, and Keith Harkness is under arrest as an accomplice.'

'Bigamy!' half-shrieked Mrs. Jones, to whom the word meant a greater public scandal than any of which she had dreamed.

'Bigamy!' repeated Clifford. 'Arline Carlisle and Keith Harkness have just testified before witnesses that these are their legal names. Arline Carlisle and Keith Harkness were married in Richmond, Virginia, less than a year ago.'

'You're crazy!' declared Bradley.

'Am I? Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Harkness will deny this bit of evidence.' And from the envelope Arline had given him Clifford drew out and placed upon the table before the eyes of the bewildered group the marriage certificate which had so astounded him a few moments earlier.

'How — how did you ever get that?' gasped Arline.

'You careless little fool!' Bradley fairly spat the words into her face. 'You gave it to him, of course!'

'I was sure I had the right certificate along,' protested Arline. 'I thought I had that certificate in one of my bags. I don't see how —'

'No matter how; I've really got you this time,' Clifford interrupted her. He turned to Bradley. 'And this time, Bradley, I've got your *real* hold over Arline Carlisle. Bigamy! You induced Miss Carlisle to commit bigamy, then held the fear of exposure and punishment over her. You could not have devised a better hold! She had to do exactly as you told her.'

Clifford turned swiftly back to Arline Carlisle. 'You

know there will not be a dime in this affair for you now, Miss Carlisle,' he drove on at her. 'And you know that in your letter, your receipt, your marriage certificate, the check on your person, I've got enough evidence to send you away for bigamy and swindling until you're an old woman! And to send your real husband away! But as I told you before, you're only the hired tool. I want your chief — Bradley. Come through with the truth about Bradley, and you go free. That's your only chance!'

'Not a word, Arline!' Bradley ordered.

'Bradley can't help you any longer,' Clifford reminded her. 'Come through with all the truth about Bradley — or go to prison!'

For a moment, white and trembling, she shifted her frightened eyes from Clifford to Bradley. All the others, still startled by the sudden revelation of the certificate, tensely watched the conflict between these two men for domination of the girl.

Presently Arline broke down.

'I'll — I'll tell everything,' she gulped in a pleading whisper. 'It was all exactly as Mr. Clifford said. My being already married was the power Mr. Bradley had over me. All that business about the pearls — the theft, the pawn-ticket, letting Mr. Clifford see the pearls this afternoon — was just carefully planned business to keep Mr. Clifford from learning about my marriage. Mr. Bradley planned that trick — he planned everything.'

'It's a lie!' harshly interposed Bradley.

'He learned all about Robert Jones,' Arline went on. 'Then he had a talk with Keith and me. Keith and I have kept our marriage secret because — because we thought we could both make more money that way. Mr. Bradley, of course, knew of our marriage. He said

there would be a lot of money for everybody if he could marry Robert Jones to a girl his mother would be ashamed of, and if we could arrange the marriage so that the mother could buy the girl off without her shame becoming public. He said he had to have a girl he was sure would play the game exactly according to his orders, and he said he had picked me for the job because I was married and wouldn't ever dare double-cross him. He was to pay me —'

'Lies — all lies!' cut in Bradley.

'Go on,' ordered Clifford.

'He offered to pay me twenty thousand if I carried the thing through successfully until we had this first payment, and seventy-five thousand more if I stuck the thing out for a year and got the divorce so that the further payment could be collected. I was horribly tired of the stage; I've been on it longer than you people believe, and I knew I'd never get anywhere as an actress. Keith used to be an actor, too; and he, too, saw nothing in the stage for him. For a long time we've been wanting to get into something else. Mr. Bradley's offer seemed to us a fortune: with that money we could start at anything we wanted to. So we accepted his offer. I know we haven't been — been honest,' she sobbed in conclusion, a note of defiance in her voice — 'but Keith is the only man I've ever really loved, and I so wanted that we should get clear of the life we'd been leading.'

'Is this true, Harkness,' asked Clifford — 'I mean about the bargain you two made with Bradley?'

'Yes.'

Clifford turned upon Bradley. 'That means I've got you at last!' he cried. 'Got you good and tight with two witnesses on a conspiracy charge that will keep you out of further trouble for a dozen years! A

conspiracy to extort a million! Jimmie, just slip those cuffs off Harkness and put them on Bradley!'

Bradley, choking, his big body trembling with rage, glowered his black hatred across at Clifford, and Clifford gazed at his ancient enemy with triumph thrilling every cell of his being. Bradley, as a power for evil, was no more! And better than all this, he had ended the alliance between Mary and Bradley; he had indeed saved Mary from herself!

He gazed at Mary with the exultant grimness of purpose achieved, and for a moment was bewildered by what he saw. Her eyes, now brilliant, were fixed straight into his. The strange suppressed look he had earlier noted in her face had changed into flushed, electric excitement. It seemed to Clifford that she was preparing to move toward him and speak. Wondering, he awaited her words.

But before her voice could come forth, there was a loud crash. Clifford turned and instantly perceived its cause. A large and heavy vase filled with roses had stood upon the table. A violent gesture of Bradley had sent it flying into a radiator and it now lay shattered on the floor.

'Try to arrest me, Clifford, and you'll find yourself in more trouble than you ever believed had been invented,' Bradley, now composed, said in a cold, hard voice. 'I've had nothing whatever to do with this story Miss Carlisle has confessed to. And certainly you'll find it mighty hard to prove anything against me by the testimony of an admitted bigamist and her co-conspirator of a husband, both engaged in a crooked game like this.'

'Bluffing won't help you now!' retorted Clifford.

'If you think I'm bluffing, arrest me and see! Mrs. Jones, I had hoped —'

The ringing of the telephone interrupted Bradley. Young Jones answered it, listened for a moment, then handed Bradley the instrument.

'Hello, Bradley speaking,' he said. 'Oh, it's you, Jackson.... What!... What!... You've really landed the thing at last! Good!... What's that?... The bird had flown yesterday. Too bad.... You say Sully's on his way here with the evidence?... Should be here by now. Good! Great work, Jackson!'

Bradley hung up. Even as he did so, the doorbell rang, and Bradley himself went into the little hall in answer to the summons. He came back in a moment with a manila envelope. He took his former stand at the table and addressed himself first to Mrs. Jones.

'I have previously told you, Mrs. Jones, that, if I had been allowed more time, I believed I could clear up this case. As it now develops I have had plenty of time.'

From the envelope he took out an unmounted snapshot print and placed it upon the table before young Jones. 'Do you recognize the gentleman?' he asked.

'Yes. He's the clergyman who performed that — that marriage ceremony.'

Clifford, taking up the print, recognized that this was indeed the Reverend Mr. Masters.

Bradley drew forth a second picture, this one mounted, and tossed it upon the table. 'Here is another of the same gentleman.'

At sight of this picture Clifford for the second time that night felt the world fall dizzily from beneath him. For this second portrait was really two portraits: a full-face portrait and a profile mounted side by side.

'What is this?' asked the bewildered young Jones.

'That's a picture from the rogues' gallery,' explained Bradley. 'The gentleman is commonly known as "Preacher Ed," because when he's hiding from the

police or planning a big job it's been his favorite practice to get a place as clergyman in some small church so poor that it takes him without examining his credentials too closely. This completely clears up the case for you, Mrs. Jones, though I'm sorry that Preacher Ed got away. He had no authority to marry people; therefore, although a license was issued, there has been no marriage, bigamous or otherwise. You have not another thing to worry about, Mrs. Jones — from Miss Carlisle's clever trick or from publicity. Your son is exactly where he was a month or six months ago.'

'Thank — thank God!' ejaculated Mrs. Jones.

'Then — then, after all,' cried Arline Carlisle, amazement and vast relief in her voice, 'I'm not guilty of bigamy as you said?'

'You are not guilty of bigamy,' coolly replied Bradley, 'and you knew it all the time, for you planned the affair as a mock marriage.'

Clifford, in bitter chagrin, now clearly saw the whole mechanism of this last swift twist of the situation. 'This Preacher Ed was your own plant, your accomplice!' he cried in furious accusation. 'You had him up there in Connecticut solely to perform this marriage — so that, if there was any last-minute slip-up in your game, you could play the card you've just played, and thereby escape being incriminated yourself and even claim to have cleared up the case. Had your game gone through, you would never have said a word about Preacher Ed. You've had men stationed in this hotel to-night, awaiting possible signals. The seemingly accidental crashing of that vase into the radiator was a sign to your man at the door to signal to another to send you that telephone message and also send these pictures. The whole thing was just a plant!'

'I'm not concerned about wild accusations, Clifford — only about proof that will stand up in a courtroom,' Bradley said. 'Prove it.'

This Clifford knew he could not do. 'At any rate, Bradley,' he flung at the other, 'I've blocked your game to get an easy million!'

'I've been working only for my fees as a detective, and those fees I have earned,' Bradley retorted with a fine show of outraged dignity. 'Mr. Jones, I am extremely happy to have brought your case to so successful a conclusion. I shall not intrude upon a scene of family relief any longer. Mary, suppose that you and I be leaving.'

Clifford had noted that Mary had gone white and tense during this final scene. She now hesitated for a brief moment. Then silently she went out with Bradley. All the while she had been in the room she had not said a word.

With a gesture Clifford told Kelly that he might go. Of those who remained, Arline Carlisle was the first to speak.

'I want all you people to understand that Mr. Clifford is absolutely right in all he has said. Except for him, Mr. Bradley would have put his game over on all of you, for I didn't know that marriage was a fake and I would have been afraid not to have done just as he ordered.' She turned to Janet Graham. 'Miss Graham, you haven't any reason at all to be ashamed of Bobbie Jones, except that for two or three weeks he was drinking a lot, and even that drinking he was practically forced into. As for the rest, he was just the victim of a trick. There has never been a single thing between him and me except that marriage, which was no marriage. And, Miss Graham, get this straight: all the time he was crazy in love with you.'

Young Jones had risen, and his soul in his strained face, was staring at Janet Graham. 'I've — I've been a fool, Janet,' he whispered huskily, 'but what she says is true, every word of it! But I don't suppose — suppose — that you — can ever —'

Janet Graham, her fine face aglow, came swiftly toward him with hands outstretched. 'Of course I can! Oh, Bobbie — you poor Bobbie!'

With glad cries they went into each other's arms. Mrs. Jones, who had so nearly brought shame and tragedy upon them all by her pride and interference, now made no move to interfere, and Clifford knew the chastened woman would never interfere again.

The next moment the pair turned impulsively on Clifford. 'You've done it all, Mr. Clifford — I know that!' breathed Janet Graham. 'Except for you — oh, it's dreadful to think what might have happened! We can never, never thank you enough! And I do wish we could also thank the writer of that anonymous letter which sent us to you!'

There was more of such gratitude from both of them; and presently Clifford was riding down the elevator with Arline Harkness and her husband, asurge with swift thoughts and emotions. He hadn't done all he had set out to do. Bradley had escaped him, to be sure. But he had blocked Bradley's scheme, and he had saved the romance of that fine young pair which had been so close to disaster. And once more he had saved Mary Regan from her strange other self.

On the sidewalk Arline offered Clifford her hand. He took it.

'Keith and I needed that money, but I'm glad you made things turn out the way they have,' she said, a warm quaver in her voice. 'When I first went into this thing, of course I'd never seen that splendid Miss

Graham, and I really didn't know how much those two loved each other — and I'd have felt miserably all my life thinking how I'd spoiled a thing like that.

'But what I can't understand,' she went on — 'what I can't understand, is how I came to give you my real marriage certificate. I had both certificates, and I know I had the one to Bobbie Jones in my handbag just before I went to the theater, for I looked to make sure. The thing's a mystery that's got me wondering.'

It was a mystery that also had Clifford wondering, after they had parted. And he wondered about another mystery: his impression that Mary had been about to speak to him during the brief moment of his apparent triumph, and her pallor and her cold repression immediately thereafter. And thrillingly he wondered if there possibly, possibly could be any connection between these two mysteries.

CHAPTER XXVI

CHECKMATING A WIFE

DURING the days that followed Clifford pondered much upon the mystery of those changed marriage certificates of Arline Harkness, and the, to him, far more important mystery of the striking contrast in Mary's manner when she had seen him seemingly win out against Bradley and then when she had seen Bradley once more elude him.

But with all his hard thinking Clifford could reach no convincing theoretical solution of the mystery represented by Mary. So in bitterness he decided that there was no mystery. What he had thought might be a mystery had been merely an optical and mental illusion on his part. The unmysterious, basic and acid-biting fact was that Mary was Bradley's ally — that she now preferred Bradley to himself, despite the other fact that she had once cared enough for him, if only for a few hours, to stand up with him and be married.

More than at any time since their secret ceremony, Clifford's mind now dwelt in bitterness upon that strange marriage whose happiness had lasted for less than half a dozen hours. Again and again his mind lived through the experience of his return to his hotel where an hour before he had left his bride, to find her gone and to find her note of parting. Again and again Clifford drew that brief unemotional note from his pocket-book and studied it with resentment which was also heart-ache — the note that called their marriage an impetuous mistake, that asked him to keep the marriage secret.

Since she didn't want him, since she preferred Bradley, since Bradley was in love with her and believed he was winning her, then why in God's name did she not free herself from that mistaken marriage and follow her perverse heart? The whole miserable business was beyond a sane man's understanding!

But upon one point Clifford's mind had perfect clarity and grim decision. So long as Mary remained his wife he was going to continue his policy of trying to save her from her worst self, of trying to block her in all her attempts at criminal activities. She might be a criminal in her heart, but if he could checkmate her she was not going to become a criminal in her achievements.

When the case of the Foster emeralds came to him, it was this grim purpose and the Mary element he sensed in the affair that interested Clifford far more than any problem or mystery presented by Foster's misadventure. Also in the case he sensed the Bradley element crouched in waiting behind the scene, and he thrilled once again to this old challenge. Professionally Clifford's first duty and first interest should have been to recover Foster's stolen property and extricate him from his menacing predicament. But from the very beginning Foster's woes were insignificant, and Foster himself was merely an incidental figure. The truly dramatic figures of the Foster affair to him were Bradley, Mary Regan, and possibly himself; and this preeminence the three continued to maintain.

When the frenzied Foster had unfolded his story — Foster's was another case that had come to Clifford at the prompting of one of those anonymous notes that had sent him so many cases these last few months — Clifford had made it a condition that his own name was in no way to be mentioned, that they were not to be

seen together, and that they were to carry on all further communication by letter and telephone. In previous conflicts with Bradley he had fallen short of complete success partly because Bradley and Mary had known they had him for an antagonist and had been cleverly prepared for him. This time they should have no such advantage. So he sent for his old friend Detective Sergeant Jimmie Kelly.

'What's the new mystery, Bob?' asked the little detective.

'It's not much of a mystery, Jimmie. I've had several cases much like it, and it will seem old stuff to you. It's interesting only because of the big money and the people involved.'

'Try out the plot on me and see what I think of your show.'

'Here's the thing in brief, Jimmie. My client is a Mr. Foster, prominent socially, not a great deal of money of his own, but partner in a growing brokerage business. His wife is very rich, but he takes no money from her; his business ambition has been to make himself the financial equal of his wife. His wife is tremendously jealous, and he is afraid of her.

'Last May his wife went to Europe. Mr. Foster remained in New York on the job. Incidentally his wife left in his hands an emerald necklace she wished to have reset. In themselves these emeralds are not so remarkably valuable; just as stones they are worth perhaps fifteen thousand. But they are unique. Any substitution of other emeralds for them would be instantly detected by the necklace's owner. There you have the original ingredients: jealous wife, away from home — husband afraid of wife and scandal — unique jewels.'

'I think I begin to smell an old acquaintance,' remarked Jimmie.

'Some one undoubtedly discovered these ingredients and their possible value,' continued Clifford. 'At any rate, the usual affair developed between the lonely summer widower and a pretty Broadway lady — a Mrs. Grover, an alleged widow. She became his chum, his confidante; all very proper, of course, according to Broadway standards. He often played bridge with a group of her friends in her apartment. He mentioned the emeralds to the lady, and she expressed a desire to see such unique specimens.

'One night when they were to play cards, Foster brought the emeralds to her place. It was a hot night and she was in charming negligee. She admired the emeralds; she asked to try the necklace on, and he gallantly told her to keep them about her beautiful neck for the rest of the evening. Of course there was plenty to drink. The bridge party played late, but at three o'clock all had gone except Foster. He was about to leave when a masked burglar entered from the fire-escape, held them up with a gun, removed the emeralds from young Mrs. Grover's neck, ironically begged pardon for interrupting such an intimate little party, and made his exit. In two weeks Mr. Foster's wife is due to arrive from Europe. You ought to know the rest, Jimmie. See if you can't finish it for yourself.'

'The grand old stolen jewel game,' Jimmie promptly took him up. 'Sell stolen jewels to a fence and you get perhaps a third of their value — and are always in danger. Sell stolen jewels to the original owner, when you've got the owner where he can't squeal, and you get your own whopping big price — and are never in danger. That's the principle, eh, Bob?

'In the case of your Mr. Foster,' continued Jimmie, 'here is about how it worked out. In two or three days that frantic, philandering husband received discreet

word about his having been alone at a very late hour in the apartment of a lovely lady not his wife — lady in negligee — cigarettes — champagne, and so forth. The evidence of this affair will be placed in the hands of his wife — unless he decides to buy back the emeralds. Price, one hundred thousand in cash. How's that?'

'Right in every detail. Except that Mr. Foster is being asked one hundred and fifty thousand for his emeralds. And Mr. Foster can't raise that much cash except by most desperate efforts. He'll be a ruined man in every way if he doesn't get back those emeralds, and he wants to get back his stolen property for nothing. That's the simple little job he has put up to me.'

'Simple — I guess not! For I suppose you're thinking Bradley is behind that affair?'

'Of course he is! Big brains planned that game and big brains are now directing it. He hasn't shown in it as yet, but in every way it is Bradley's kind of game!'

'And you, Bob, not only want to get the emeralds, but want also to get Bradley?'

'I'm far more concerned in merely getting Bradley,' Clifford confessed. He would have liked to tell of his purpose regarding Mary, but even to Jimmie Kelly the marriage was a secret.

'Here's hoping you get both Bradley and the emeralds. Now where do you want me to fit into the picture?'

'In several places. First of all I want you to learn what you can about Foster's charmer, that Mrs. Grover.'

With impatience Clifford waited for the report of Jimmie Kelly. It irked him to play the inactive rôle for which he had cast himself — particularly with the

bitterness of his heart urging him on to some savage, open action that could tear Mary away from Bradley's malign influence.

The next day Jimmie Kelly reappeared. 'I have the dope on that Mrs. Grover,' he said. 'She's a high-living Broadway beauty without visible means of support, but the police haven't a thing on her.'

'All the same she has been taking orders from Bradley,' declared Clifford. 'She captivated Foster, got his wife's emeralds around her throat ready for that fake burglar — all according to Bradley's instructions.'

'Sure,' agreed Jimmie. 'I wish your Mr. Foster could give a description of the burglar. That might give us a lead in the affair.'

'I doubt it. That burglar was probably just paid for his part in the job, the same as Mrs. Grover, and doubtless didn't know what the real game was or for whom he was working. We can count him out. It's likely that even Mrs. Grover doesn't know who he is.'

'Any idea where those sucker's emeralds are?'

'Not the slightest. Except that they are in some spot known to Bradley — and that spot may be any one of a million safe-deposit boxes.'

'If Bradley has them, how the dickens do you expect to get them away from him?'

'You've exactly sized up my problem, Jimmie. I have not told Foster this, but I have mighty little hope of getting those emeralds from their hiding-place until the hour when Foster is at an appointed place with the hundred and fifty thousand. Though of course I shall be trying to get the stones before then.'

'Foster ought to turn this affair over to the police,' declared Jimmie.

'He's afraid of the newspaper scandal if the thing were handled by public officials. Of course, if I can

prove that he is the victim of a carefully planned trap, then his case will appear very different and he won't be so afraid of publicity. That's the line I'm working on and I'm out to do my best.'

Clifford had already started to do his best — that is, his best under the restrictions he had placed upon his personal activities — and during the days that followed he continued to do his best. In other affairs he had gained valuable clues by watching Mary Regan; and he now kept Mary under his surveillance, purposely avoiding any personal encounter with her. There was little use watching Mrs. Grover since her active connection with the affair was probably ended. And there was no use watching Bradley; he would adroitly leave all preliminary details to agents.

Two hours after his talk with Jimmie Kelly, Clifford saw Mary Regan lunching at the Grantham. With her was the beautiful Mrs. Grover. After luncheon he glimpsed her in a corner of the lobby talking very confidentially to Bradley. Clifford needed no further proof; his conjectures regarding these two were now certainties; Bradley was in it and Mary was in it. His ancient bitterness became more violently determined.

Clifford settled grimly to this business of watching Mary, though he overlooked no possibility of locating the stolen gems. On the second day he saw Mary lunching with Mr. Foster; two days later he saw them together again. Therefore he was not surprised when Foster telephoned him that Mary was acting as agent in bargaining for the return of the emeralds.

The days passed. Clifford kept himself busy, but the affair was now one of tedious, irritating routine. Nothing whatever happened, and he learned nothing further. Clifford was not surprised or disappointed, for he had expected this blank period.

Of course the messages from Foster became more and more frenzied. At length, three days before Mrs. Foster's expected arrival, the blow fell. Foster telephoned that he had received his ultimatum from Mary. Unless he was ready to do business the following night, the world and its wife, also his wife, would know the worst. Clifford had gradually prepared Foster for this situation, and he now instructed Foster to accede to all demands. Later he himself made it a point to mark every bill of the one hundred and fifty thousand Foster had with utmost difficulty managed to raise.

Everything so far had gone as Clifford had really expected. He was going to be in at the finish, though he did not so inform Foster, and that marked money had a very important part in his plan.

A new problem now confronted Clifford: Where was the exchange of money for emeralds to take place? Foster did not know; he was to be met by some unnamed person at an hour to be appointed and escorted to the rendezvous. The transaction might have as its setting any spot within a hundred miles of New York.

Clifford decided to adhere to his policy of watching Mary Regan. Thus it was, at four o'clock the following afternoon, he was in a taxicab a block behind Mary's car when the latter stopped before a house in East Seventy-Third Street just off Fifth Avenue. Mary got out, went up the stoop of a splendid house, its lower windows boarded up for the summer, and unlocked the door with a key which she took from her purse. On the front of the house was nailed a real-estate agent's sign which read: 'For Sale — or to Lease Furnished.'

That instant inspiration registered a bull's-eye on Clifford. This house probably belonged to a friend of Bradley, and Bradley had the privilege to use it how and when he pleased; this would account for Mary's

having possession of the key. What safer place in all the world for that night's business than this fine empty house in this fine street emptied of its rich inhabitants by the summer heat!

Undoubtedly Mary was making this advance visit to get acquainted with the stage selected for the evening's drama. Clifford also wanted to become acquainted with the house's interior; and fifteen minutes later he was chatting with a clerk in the real-estate agent's office. The house, he learned, belonged to a childless widower. At the mention of the owner's name, Clifford knew he had guessed the reason for Bradley's having the freedom of the place; Mr. Bigelow was under secret obligation to Bradley.

Clifford expressed a desire to see the interior of the house with a view of possibly purchasing it; and in another fifteen minutes he was being shown through it, mentally charting every room, every closet, every door, every light switch. As he and the clerk stepped back into the agent's car, Clifford became suddenly apologetic.

'It was awfully dumb of me, but I forgot and left my gloves inside. Please don't bother; I remember now just where I laid them down. If you'll let me have the key, I'll be with you again in two minutes.'

The key was given him. Inside the door Clifford carefully made a wax impression of the key. Then, taking his gloves from his pocket, he rejoined the agent's clerk. Two hours later he was in executive session with Jimmie Kelly.

'I had two keys to the house made,' he explained, 'and here's yours. I want you as witness to what happens in that house to-night. Hang around the neighborhood out of sight and see who goes in. Pay no attention to me. Somebody will bring Foster there, and

I figure that a little later another somebody will come. That second somebody will be the party who will handle the emeralds and the cash. Come into the house about a minute after this person. You can locate the conference room by the voices. I'll try to leave a door open so that you can see as well as hear. I want these people to play their game out to the very end, so don't show yourself until I call you. Got all that?'

'Yes. When you call me, what do I do then?'

'Then,' responded Clifford, 'you'll be making an arrest or two.'

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MYSTERY OF MARY REGAN

SEVENTY-THIRD STREET was gloomy with silence and the protecting shadows of nine o'clock when Clifford glided swiftly through it and slipped up the steps of the house Mary's incautious action had marked for him that afternoon. A moment's use of his duplicate key and he stood in the dead blackness within, thinking of his next procedure.

Doubt momentarily assailed him. He was not really sure that this splendid, uninhabited mansion was to be the scene of the emerald transaction; but instinct argued that he was right; the empty house was too ideal a spot for Bradley's purpose not to be the chosen place. But even so, now that he was here, Clifford had no idea in which of the score of rooms the exchange of stolen jewels for a fortune in cash was to take place, and it was necessary for him to be at a door adjoining that room where he could witness and hear all.

His pocket flash revealed to him a clothes closet beneath the marble stairs which he had marked that afternoon. Into this he moved swiftly, and closed the door to a crack. He would wait here until the other chief actors came, then follow them to the room chosen for their business.

A period of tense waiting among overcoats and wraps ensued: an hour during which his certainty of conjecture was being again challenged by the fear that he had guessed entirely wrong. Perhaps, while he stood there inactive, Bradley was elsewhere with Mary undangerously putting through this his latest game!

Perhaps Mary's coming here had been merely a trick devised by the intuitive Bradley to lead him into self-elimination during the crucial hour!

His illumined dial showed eleven o'clock. He was on the point of leaving, disgusted with his own judgment, when a key grated in the front door, two pairs of footsteps entered, the door closed. Then Clifford saw a slender white finger of light flash into the reception room, and heard a voice say:

'Wait in there for the present, Mr. Foster. Your party will be here in a little while. In the meantime I must attend to a little business up in the library. If I am not back in five minutes, you may come on up.'

The voice was that of Mary Regan!

Clifford saw her usher Mr. Foster into the reception room and leave him in its darkness. Then she moved down the hallway and paused within a foot of the door of the closet within which Clifford was concealed. For a tense moment Clifford feared she would fling open the door, turn her flash upon him, and his plan would come to nothing. But whatever her purpose in coming here, that purpose seemed to change; she turned and Clifford knew she was mounting the stairway, picking out the steps with her flashlight. What could be this little business she was attending to in the library? Something in the way of preparation, of course — but just what it was he simply had to know.

He gave her a full minute's start. Then in the blackness, hardly breathing, his steps striving for the noiselessness of spirit feet, he crept through the darkness up the stairway. The library was at the back of the second floor. Its door was ajar and a blade of white light cut into the darkness of the hallway. Clifford considered his course, then slipped forward and put an eye to the crack. Within at a desk, her evening coat

fallen from her smooth white shoulders, sat Mary Regan, eyes fixed upon a sheet of paper.

Only a moment did Clifford gaze in at her with clear mind. Then his old bitterness and old determination swept over him, and overmastered caution. He stepped inside and closed the door. At the click of the lock, Mary Regan sprang up and whirled upon him, a pencil falling from her hand.

'So you're still at it — in the midst of another of Bradley's games!' Clifford flung at her.

Her surprise was instantly replaced by proud wrath. 'And that,' she demanded defiantly — 'what's that to you?'

'Just this,' he retorted grimly; 'I promised to keep our marriage secret. But I never promised to let you go into crooked work with Bradley and I'm going to block you now, just as I've blocked you in the past.'

'Oh, you are, are you!' she taunted.

'I am! And now kindly give me that paper you were reading.'

Her answer was a scornful look and the thrusting of the paper behind her back. But with a swift spring he was upon her, and, though he hated this use of physical strength, after a moment of struggle the paper was his and his left hand was locked upon her right wrist in such a grip that she could not try to assail him without inflicting twisting agony upon herself.

'You — you brute!' she gasped.

'I'm willing to be a brute to save you!' he snapped back. 'Now we'll see what's on this paper you were so keen about.'

So standing, with her his helpless prisoner, he examined the sheet. It was a brief note, bearing neither address nor signature, but the hasty writing he recognized as Bradley's. It read:

Take him to the house at eleven o'clock and arrange for the proceedings to take place in the library. You need not be present. To avoid slip-up I shall handle the matter personally.

He turned hard, understanding eyes upon her. 'So — these are Bradley's last-minute instructions to you!'

'Give that back to me!' she demanded.

'I know all I want. Take it — and welcome.' He handed the note back to her. 'But as I told you, I shall keep you out of this affair!'

'You cannot — even with your brute force!' she flung back at him.

'I may mention to you,' he warned, 'that Jimmie Kelly is wise to what is going to happen here to-night, and will be a witness to everything. So the safe thing for you will be to do exactly as I say and keep out of this mix-up.'

For a moment they glared at each other. Then steps were heard mounting the stairway. Instantly Clifford's right hand closed tight upon Mary's mouth and he swept her, too startled to fight against his purpose, into the darkened little study off the library and closed the door to a bare slit. Against his superior strength Mary could neither make outcry nor any noise or struggle.

Through the crack Clifford saw Foster enter the library door, gaze around, then seat himself in nervous expectancy. Minutes passed during which Mary struggled against the manacles of Clifford's embrace, then her taut body relaxed. More minutes passed; then again steps sounded upon the stairway, and again Clifford saw a man enter the library. Save for eyes the man was masked by a white handkerchief, but there was no mistaking him. He was Bradley.

Bradley closed the door and moved toward Foster,

who had risen. 'Where is the woman who brought you here?'

'I don't know,' said Foster. 'She may have gone.'

'It's just as well; we don't need her,' said Bradley. 'Since you're here, I suppose that means you have the hundred and fifty thousand?'

'Yes. But couldn't you make the amount less? Your price is ten times what the emeralds cost me.'

'Think you can beat me down at the last minute?' growled Bradley. His voice changed into a disguised voice of distinctive quality. 'Know who you're talking to just now?'

'My God!' gasped Foster. 'By your voice — yes!'

'Who am I?'

'The burglar who held me up!'

At this Clifford could barely hold back an exclamation.

'Then you ought to know just what I can do to you,' said Bradley. 'Come across with the money.'

Silently Foster held out the one hundred and fifty thousand in marked bills. Bradley counted the packet of bills, placed them in a pocket, then handed the emerald necklace to Foster.

'There you are,' he said. 'That makes us all square on this deal. I'll just be telling you good-night.'

Clifford throbbed with wild exultation. 'Stay in here; keep out of what happens next,' he whispered authoritatively to Mary; and releasing her, he stepped into the library, automatic in hand.

'Stick 'em up, Bradley!' he ordered.

Bradley whirled about. 'Clifford!' he ejaculated. 'What the hell —' His right hand moved swiftly toward a hip pocket.

'Come away from that gun, or I'll shoot! Up with 'em!'

Bradley hesitated. Then his hands went above his head. Clifford moved forward until his automatic was against Bradley's chest.

'First, Bradley, we'll get rid of your sting.' He removed the pistol from Bradley's hip pocket, and slapped his other pockets; they held no arms. The marked money he left on Bradley's person; he wanted Jimmie Kelly, who was waiting outside the door, to be a witness to all that followed. He jerked the masking handkerchief down around Bradley's neck. The face was livid with amazement and furious hatred.

Clifford moved back a step.

'You may lower your hands now. I've got you this time, Bradley,' he cried, 'and got you cold! Got you in one of your biggest games! Got you as an admitted burglar, and also as a blackmailer with a hundred and fifty thousand in marked money on your person! Got you for a blackmailing scheme which you plotted and carried through yourself!'

But even in this his moment of greatest personal triumph, Clifford exulted most in the fact that his capture of Bradley meant the end of Bradley's strange, maleficent control over Mary Regan.

Bradley glowered at Clifford, for the moment too enraged and nonplussed to speak. But his dark inflamed face admitted all that Clifford had said — admitted final defeat in his schemes for gathering folly's gold — defeat in his fight with his greatest personal enemy.

'How the hell could a boob like you pull this off?' he demanded with an attempt at a sneer. 'Fool's luck!'

'I pulled it off, Bradley,' retorted Clifford, in his triumph, 'because I guessed your game! Because I followed every move of your accomplices, and was all set for exactly what's happened!'

There was an instant of silence while the two enemies gazed at each other. Foster blinked and gaped at the pair. Then there was a slight noise behind Clifford. Instantly hope leaped into Bradley's face.

'Quick — cover him with a gun, Mary!' Bradley cried. 'We'll beat Clifford out yet!'

Clifford did not turn. His skin creeping, he expected the thrust of a pistol barrel against his spine. But that did not happen. Instead, Mary walked past him into his field of vision and there halted.

'I tried to save you!' Clifford exclaimed bitterly. 'Why didn't you keep out of this, as I ordered? Now you can't escape arrest and prosecution — you're in this mess up to your neck!'

She seemed not to hear him; her gaze was fixed on Bradley.

'I heard you ask Mr. Clifford how this was pulled off, Mr. Bradley,' she said. 'I think that you should see this.'

She held out to him a sheet of paper. Clifford recognized it as Bradley's letter of instructions to her. Bradley glanced it through, then looked up. Stupefaction was in his face.

'I never wrote this thing!' he cried. 'It's forged!'

'Forged!' echoed Clifford.

'Yes, forged,' said Mary Regan quietly. 'I wrote it myself.'

'You?' exclaimed Clifford. 'You? — but why?'

She addressed herself to Clifford. 'I did not learn the exact working of this plan until the last moment — too late to put in your way in advance any adequate clue. I knew you would be here. I saw you in the closet beneath the stairway. I slipped up here and forged that note; it was my intention to go back down and by seeming accident drop that note, where you

would be sure to find it, and then leave the house. But you came into the library the instant I had finished writing.'

'You mean that you double-crossed me?' demanded Bradley.

Clifford was swirling in such an amazement as he had never known in all his life.

'You mean,' he gasped, 'that you did that to help me?'

'Yes,' said Mary, facing him squarely. 'Just as I have been doing all I could to help you ever since we were married.'

'Married?' exploded Bradley. 'Married?'

'Mr. Clifford and I have been married a long time,' she explained. 'Secretly, of course.'

Bradley almost choked in his stupefaction and his furious chagrin — to think that all this time he had confidently hoped that some day Mary Regan would be Mary Bradley!

'Been helping me all the while!' echoed the dazed Clifford. 'But the letter of parting you wrote me the very day we were married? I — I don't understand!'

'I did not intend you to understand,' explained Mary in a voice of tense steadiness. 'At least not till the danger was all over. The afternoon we came back from being married, and you had to leave me for an hour, Uncle Joe came to see me. He had arranged for that imperative message which called you out so he and I could be alone. He told me that Mr. Bradley was certain to beat the charges that were then pending against him, as he later actually did, and that Mr. Bradley was going to put you out of business. That meant your career, your good name, even your life, were in hourly danger. I was desperate. Uncle Joe and I worked things out together. I had to do all that I could to save

you — not only because of our marriage, but because I had helped bring this danger upon you. There could never be any safety for you, or any happiness for me, while Mr. Bradley was free to plan against you. Then my idea came. I could help you best by parting from you, by working on the other side and secretly warning you of things that were about to happen. So I wrote you that letter of parting.'

Both men stared at her. Her amazing revelation of the Mary Regan that really was, and had been all this while, reduced both men to whirling bewilderment — gasping for more of her strange story.

'And — and all this while you've been on my side?' exclaimed the dazed Clifford. 'Been acting a part?'

'Acting a part, yes,' said Mary.

'But,' breathed Clifford — 'but why didn't you let me know all this from the beginning?'

'I did not dare. I was afraid you might forbid me. And if you had not forbidden me, I was afraid you might not at all times be able to act your part. Success depended upon your appearance of belief — and that meant for you actually to believe, until all was over, that I was on Mr. Bradley's side.'

The magnitude of what Mary had done these long months, unguessed by him, crowded bewilderingly upon Clifford. 'Then all the clues in the many cases I thought I was so clever in turning up — you planted them?'

'Yes. But I had to do it so you would not suspect I was planting them. Now that all is over, I want you to know the whole truth. Every time you've found a clue from watching me, every time you've overheard me in an incriminating conversation — I've carefully planned them all. And I've made you suspect me, so that you would be sure to watch me, to follow me.'

'Then also,' continued the dazed Clifford, whose

vision of the amazing past was growing clearer, 'when Bradley has had me trapped, and I escaped him by a last-moment discovery that made me feel so clever — you planted that discovery?'

'I planted the key to his trick where you'd be sure to find it.'

Another strange phase of this long struggle flashed with enlightening possibility upon Clifford. 'And those anonymous letters which sent so many clients to me — you wrote them?'

'Yes. The cases were all ones in which I thought you might get Bradley in a big criminal operation.'

'My God!' breathed Clifford. 'My God!'

'That's all,' Mary concluded, 'except that I did not dare reveal to you the part I was playing until I was certain that Mr. Bradley was definitely out of the way. Every case I had hoped would end in your success, your safety. But there were so many slips — and I had to keep up the rôle. But now, at last, you have won, and it is all ended — all ended!'

She stood very pale, very straight, dark eyes into his. Clifford was still dumbfounded by the story she had told — the most amazing story he had ever heard. Then memory of his own attitude overwhelmed him.

'And all this while,' he exclaimed in his humiliation, 'I accused you, scorned you! I was trying to balk you, to save you from yourself!'

'Don't blame yourself for that. I purposely made you feel and act that way.'

A still further realization came to Clifford. 'And in all these cases I thought I was doing clever and great work!' he cried. 'When, behind the scenes, you were the one who was really doing everything!'

She did not answer. All this time Bradley, black and glowering, had chokingly listened in silence to this

unfoldment of the strange collapse of his many plans and his great dreams. The whole thing was clear to him now. He lunged with curved, tense fingers toward Mary.

'You spy!' he cried in guttural fury. 'You damnable spy!'

'Stay where you are!' Clifford snapped out, and checked Bradley with a pistol jammed against his face.

'Yes, I've been a spy, Mr. Bradley,' Mary's voice rang out, her eyes steady and clear. 'This has been war. In war a spy's work is honorable, though death may be the spy's end. Besides, I was a spy to help fight my husband's battles. I expected no mercy from you if I ever made a slip and you found out. That's another reason I had to be so careful. But now' — and her figure tensed — 'now the war is over, the danger is past — you are at last caught!'

Slowly Bradley backed away from her gaze and Clifford's pistol, and stood quivering with a vast but futile rage. At that moment, his glaring eyes on Clifford, he saw that his whole world, all that he had fought and schemed for, was lost. And in that same moment Clifford realized anew the marvelous, dizzying truth: Bradley and the great evil force of his genius were at last out of his way and the world's way; and far more than that, Mary, Mary, whom all this bitter while he had scorned, Mary had all the bitter while been loving him. At last the end had come. Peace was his. Success had been finally won, though chiefly through the efforts of another. Exultantly but tentatively he stretched his left hand toward Mary. She took it, pressed it tightly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BRADLEY'S HIGH CARD

BRADLEY glowered at the two, his great chest heaving. A long moment of silence passed while the gazes of these three held. Then Bradley regained something of his iron control.

'Well, what you going to do with me?' he asked harshly.

'I guess you know,' was Clifford's grim reply. 'You'll get all I can help the law give you.'

'I supposed as much.' Bradley seemed resigned to his fate, though his manner did not soften. 'Before you lead your prisoner away, is there any objection to his helping himself to a smoke? Oh, there's no danger in my reaching for a pocket; you've got my gun, you know.'

'Go ahead, but make it snappy,' ordered Clifford.

Bradley reached leisurely into a pocket. But as his hand came out he sprang like a flash at Foster, who till now had been no more than a stupefied spectator, and thrust something into his victim's possession.

'There's your hundred and fifty thousand, Foster!' he exclaimed. 'Hold on to it!'

Bradley whirled on Clifford. His resigned glower had swiftly changed to a malignant sneer.

'Where's your evidence, Clifford?' he cried. 'You haven't got one thing on me!'

'That old stage trick won't help you this time, Bradley,' Clifford said contemptuously. 'I have witnesses who have seen and heard everything.' Till that

moment, because of Mary's unexpected behavior and amazing story, he had entirely forgotten Jimmie Kelly, whose orders had been to remain an unseen witness to events until summoned. Now he remembered; Jimmie should be standing in the deep shadow just outside the half-open door of the library.

'Jimmie!' he called. 'Come in, Jimmie!'

'Jimmie Kelly!' echoed Mary triumphantly. 'Come in!'

But no one entered. Bradley laughed mockingly. 'Better look!' he taunted.

Clifford crossed to the library door. The corridor without was empty.

'So your Jimmie Kelly also had a duplicate key, eh?' Again Bradley laughed mockingly. 'I had no suspicion concerning an interruption to this little party, but instinctively I shot the chain-bolt home when I came in. I imagine Jimmie has found that a duplicate key won't unlock a chain-bolt!'

Clifford was chagrined by this unexpected twist, but not greatly disturbed. 'I have other witnesses,' he returned. 'You're forgetting Mr. Foster — and also Mary Regan.'

Bradley seemed suddenly to have swollen in size, to have acquired a tremendous hard-hitting vigor. 'Mary Regan, eh?' he cried, with a furious menace in his voice. 'Bring her into court against me, and I'll prove, with witnesses, that she's been in this game on exactly the same terms as I have. And I'll prove she's been in a dozen other games. I'll prove that she's a crook. And that she comes of a family of crooks. She'll not be believed; her testimony will be thrown out of court. All you'll gain, Clifford, will be publicity to give Mary Regan the reputation of a dirty rag — and you know it!'

Bradley whirled upon Mr. Foster. 'And if this affair becomes public and gets into court, do you know what will happen to you, Mr. Foster?' he hammered at his dazed victim. 'Day after to-morrow your wife lands. If you testify against me, I'll admit the whole affair. But I'll say that I stole your wife's emeralds from the lily-white neck of Mrs. Grover. And Mrs. Grover will testify that you gave her the emeralds as a present — your wife's emeralds. And I'll make that three A.M. love scene between you and Mrs. Grover in her apartment the very limit of love-making. Incidentally, to those in the know, Mrs. Grover has quite a gay reputation — "Butterfly Bonnie" is what the newspapers will call her. If you and Miss Regan testify against me, I may get hurt — possibly. But *certainly* you, the proud and respectable Mr. Foster, will be eternally smashed!'

Bradley brought his big fist crashing down for emphasis. Already Clifford had caught the purpose of this swift maneuver, and had tried to interrupt the driving thunder of Bradley's speech. Now his chance had come.

'Stick tight, Foster,' he ordered sharply, 'and you'll come clear! He's a crook — we've got him caught — and with your evidence and Miss Regan's we'll put him where he belongs. You were trapped in a frame-up!'

'That's hot air, as far as concerns you, Foster!' Bradley drove at the man. 'You just remember this: I can't be touched without your story being spread all over every front page. You'll find yourself the central figure of the season's most sensational scandal — the notorious figure of a divorce suit, which your wife will easily win — and your wife has all the real money in your family. That's what Clifford will get for you! As

for me — you already have your emeralds and your money back. Stick with me and I'll save you all the rest!'

'Shut up, Bradley!' ordered Clifford. 'You're tampering with a witness!'

'He's not a witness unless he wants to be!' Bradley flung back. 'Besides, though you can arrest me, you can't keep me from talking!'

Foster, now pasty of face, was tremulously licking his lips. 'How — how can you do what you say, Mr. Bradley?'

'You boob, don't you see it?' cried Bradley. 'Since Clifford has no witness that will stand up in court, since all the material evidence is now in your own possession, the only way he can arrest me is upon your complaint. If you decide to make no complaint, the case is dead this moment and there will never be a whisper about you. Which do you want, Mr. Foster: the social and financial disgrace Clifford offers — or all your property back and the honor and good name and safety I offer?'

Suddenly sickened, Clifford made no further appeal to Foster. The way in which Foster tremulously fumbled at his tiny mustache, and the way in which his china-blue eyes avoided him and held to Bradley in frightened fascination, told Clifford that Foster had been won over by the swift and sure manner in which Bradley had perceived and attacked the one weak spot in the situation and had played upon that weakness with the mastery of perverted genuis. Clifford now clearly recognized Foster was a handsome, spineless, self-saving fool: poor material for support in any crisis. And Clifford recognized the full truth of Bradley's declaration: without a complainant there could be no case whatever.

'I — I will make no complaint,' said Foster in any dry, thin whisper.

With those words Clifford knew Bradley had once more escaped him: escaped him in the very moment of what he had considered his ultimate and crushing triumph. The thing had come so swiftly that Clifford was still bewildered by the sheer unexpectedness of the move. Nonetheless, he met unwaveringly the blaze of Bradley's leering, taunting, malignant exultation.

'You heard what Mr. Foster said, Clifford. I presume you do not wish to detain him longer.'

'No,' said Clifford.

'Go with my compliments, Mr. Foster,' said Bradley, with a contempt he did not try to hide. 'And you take with you your emeralds, your money, and your precious good name.'

Without a word or a glance about him the handsome craven slunk from the room.

'I know you're saying I'm guilty, Clifford,' Bradley mocked. 'But — you didn't get me!'

He moved a pace nearer to Clifford and Mary, and his dark eyes blazed upon them with the terrible fury of hatred and of a dreamed-of love that has been frustrated.

'I'll say just one thing to you two,' he gritted. 'Mary Regan spoke of this as having been a war, and a war you'd won. I serve notice that the real war has only just begun! And I'm far stronger than I was before, now that a spy is out of my camp and not able to work against me. And I'm serving notice that I'm going my own way in my own affairs and you two can't stop me. And never forget this: from now on I'm out to get, not one of you, but both of you! Remember — both of you!'

For a silent moment his eyes seemed to burn red in

his gigantic rage. Then abruptly he turned, and the menace of his powerful figure, with his great but twisted genius, was gone.

Clifford did not even hear him go. He stood gazing at Mary in silence, and with a like fixity Mary gazed at him. For a brief time, in this greater wonder of Mary, Clifford forgot that he had failed with Bradley. For such a long and dreary time he had not looked into Mary's face without bitterness and misconception, though all the while his love for her had persisted. It seemed almost unbelievable to him that they should now be facing each other, clear-eyed and without misunderstanding. What a wonder Mary had been through it all!

'My trying to block you, save you,' Clifford at length whispered huskily and abjectly — 'what a fool I made of myself!'

'Remember what I told you,' she said softly — 'that I am entirely to blame. It was the part I tried to act that caused you to do what you did.'

Her dark eyes were steady, luminous. He caught his breath sharply.

'Mary — can you forgive it all?'

'There is nothing to forgive,' sounded her quavering voice — 'if you still feel as you once did.'

With a cry he opened his arms. She came into them and they strained her to him. This was the most amazing mystery of all. His wife — his own wife — after all this struggle and pain! And she loved him — loved him! . . .

Presently they drew a little apart that they might the better see each other. 'It is wonderful to be together again,' breathed Mary. 'But we must never forget — never! — what Mr. Bradley said: that the war is still on, and that it will be a more bitter war than

before. But we now shall be fighting together side by side — you and I.'

'Side by side — you and I,' repeated Clifford.

Hand in hand they went down the dark stairway of the empty house.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MISSING HEIRESS

It was two weeks since Bradley had walked out of the empty house after exploding with black threats. Mary and Clifford were in Clifford's inner office, she across the desk from him. She was still Mary Regan to her world, for her marriage to Clifford, for reasons of private policy, had not yet been made public.

'You've simply got to let me help you!' Mary exclaimed, returning stubbornly to the point she had been trying to carry with Clifford ever since their reunion.

'But now that everything is cleared up between the two of us, I want you to keep out of danger,' Clifford replied with equal insistence. 'God knows you and I have had our share of trouble!'

'Yes, and our trouble is not over, and I want to stand with you till its end!' she persisted. 'We're in greater danger than before, and we don't know from what direction the trouble will come. It's Bradley I'm talking about, and there's nothing except actual murder that he'll not try against us!

'Since the trouble he's made for you has been largely because of me,' she drove on, 'it's strictly up to me to help you out. I was pretty much of a failure all those months I was trying to work for you behind a smoke screen. Now I'm going to work against Bradley in the open!'

'But, Mary — I don't want you again out on the firing line! He might aim first at you. The subtle, ruthless danger Bradley represents —'

'All the more reason I should help! And that's exactly what I'm going to do!'

On and on they went, repeating all their old arguments. While they argued, Clifford was assembling the documents of a case which was to start him to Chicago in a few hours, but his eyes were ever going across his desk to the dark beauty of Mary. She seemed so very young to have been through so many of life's adventures, only twenty-four; and their reunion, after a year of separation following their strange marriage, was still in the nature of a miracle to him.

'At any rate,' at length declared the persistent Mary, 'I'm going to take care of your office routine while you're away!'

Clifford smiled with resignation. He knew when he was beaten.

'And if anything comes up about Mr. Bradley, I'm going to look out for both of us.'

'I suppose I can't prevent you.'

It was just then that Clifford's secretary entered with a card. Clifford whistled softly as he read it. 'Show him in,' he ordered, and there entered a tall, graying man of a bearing which gave the instant suggestion that he was accustomed to high deference. This, indeed, was the case, for the gentleman was Lorrimer Drayton, head of Drayton & Co., that splendid jewelry establishment on Fifth Avenue, nationally regarded as the smartest, most distinctive, and most reliable place to buy one's gems.

Clifford spoke before his caller could summon words. 'I presume, Mr. Drayton, that you have come on the matter of your daughter?'

'You are entirely correct, Mr. Clifford.' Mr. Drayton's distinguished face was twitching with an agitation he seemed unable to suppress. 'The police have not been able to do a thing.'

'I'm afraid I cannot give you much of my own personal time during the next few days, Mr. Drayton. But Miss Regan is assisting me' — here Clifford introduced Mary, and to her Mr. Drayton gave the bow of the finished man of the world he really was — 'and while I'm away perhaps she'd help you out.'

'I'd be only too happy!' exclaimed Mary.

For an instant the great jeweler scrutinized Mary with surprised eyes that were sharp and thoughtful despite their obvious distress. 'I shall be grateful to Miss Regan. A woman to solve a woman's case — that seems almost an ideal arrangement.'

Mr. Drayton then proceeded to outline his situation. Every so often New York reads in its papers with a few new details the old story of the 'Mysterious Disappearance of Beautiful Heiress.' Of all such stories, the mystery of the disappearance of Marcia Drayton five days before had been the most sensational the New York papers had had in many years. In her case there was solid reason for this sensation: she was really rich, she was really beautiful, she was really socially important. The facts of the case, as given to the press, had been meager. Marcia Drayton had gone out one evening for a bit of a walk, and had never come back; none of her belongings was missing; no word had come from her, or about her. But upon these few facts the eager papers had built a score of explanations, suggesting a romantic elopement, suggesting abduction and ransom, suggesting even dark tragedy.

To Clifford and Mary, however, Mr. Drayton now confided facts not given to the police and press which constituted a most distressing skeleton in his family closet. His motherless daughter had developed from a pert flapper into an extreme specimen of those daring, willful, self-confident young women so characteristic

of these present days. She had many friends of whom he did not approve; she had often slipped out of nights to join these comrades of her wildness in some gay dancing resort. Finally he had delivered his ultimatum to her, and she had defied him.

That quarrel was the true reason for Marcia Drayton's disappearance. She had really gone with plenty of clothes and she had her own banking account in which was a very considerable balance. It was his belief that she had taken refuge with some one of these wild girl friends, who was unknown to him, and was occasionally venturing out for a bit of that night life to which she had become addicted and which had been the cause of the break.

'This is why I welcome the chance of having a woman on the case,' Mr. Drayton concluded. 'A clever woman may do things a man could not in hunting among these reckless, brilliant girls among whom I believe my daughter is hiding. And if you don't object' — this to Mary, with the obvious suspense of a father — 'I'd like to go about with you occasionally.'

To this request Mary agreed, and thus it was she became involved in the famous Drayton affair which was destined to become even more famous.

For four afternoons and nights Mary haunted the smart cafés and the alleged exclusive night clubs, looking ever for the missing Marcia Drayton, whose portrait her father had supplied. Twice Mr. Drayton had accompanied her. On this, the fifth night, she and Mr. Drayton were in The Silver Moon, which was just then having its highest period of brief fame for its brilliance and clever naughtiness; and Mary eagerly searched the face of every woman who came through the gold-and-purple entrance and joined the smart

crowd of hilarious after-midnight dancers swinging under the soft lights of ever-changing color.

Presently Mary opened her bag and glanced at her watch. 'It's now half-past twelve, Mr. Drayton,' she remarked. 'Shall we try some other night club?'

'Let's wait here a little longer, please!' begged the father. 'We've been to three other places already since eleven o'clock — and The Silver Moon is one of the places Marcia most often came to when she slipped out of nights.'

'Very well,' agreed Mary.

She closed her bag, leaving it on the table, and for several minutes continued her search among the crowd of whirling pleasure-makers for the girlish face of the errant Marcia Drayton. Suddenly Mr. Drayton caught her wrist.

'Marcia!' he gasped, rising. 'There she is! See!'

'Where?' cried Mary.

'She just came out of the women's dressing-room! My God — she's turned and gone back again! She must have seen me!'

Mary was on her feet, instinctively drawing her evening coat about her shoulders and snatching her bag from the table. 'Come on!' she commanded.

'I'll follow you to the door — but they'll not let a man in the ladies' dressing-room. It's all up to you! For God's sake, hurry!'

Without a backward glance at Mr. Drayton, Mary moved swiftly along the edge of the milling crowd, between curtains into a short hallway, and through another pair of curtains into the ladies' dressing-room. Her quick glance checked off half a dozen hand-made young beauties who were repairing their appearance with the help of the attendant. But no Marcia Drayton was there.

'Was a young woman in here a moment ago?' Mary rapidly asked the attendant. 'About nineteen — slender — dark hair?'

'She may have been here, but I've been so busy I didn't notice her,' replied the woman. 'She probably went in to dance.'

'No, for I've had my eyes on the dancing entrance since she came in here.'

'Then she must have left the Silver Moon by the other way. There's a stairway especially for women direct from this room to the street.'

The attendant showed Mary this exit, and Mary went down the narrow stairway with the best speed that evening slippers would allow. She came out on a side street a dozen yards from Broadway, and swiftly glanced in each direction. There was no hurrying girlish figure in sight, and not even a speeding taxicab in which the girl might be making her escape. Mary moved quickly to the corner of Broadway and for several moments stood looking eagerly up and down that avenue of midnight radiance. But here also there was no figure resembling Marcia Drayton.

For several moments she stood thus scanning the crowd. Then she saw Mr. Drayton come out of the main entrance of The Silver Moon and hurry toward her.

'Your daughter was too quick for me, she got away,' Mary explained as he came up.

Mr. Drayton seized her arm. 'Police!' he cried. 'Police!'

'What?' gasped Mary.

'Police!' he shouted. 'Police!'

Mr. Drayton's second cry was no more than out of his mouth when an officer was at his side, and a curious crowd was beginning to elbow about them.

'What's the trouble?' demanded the policeman.

Mr. Drayton was the quicker with his words. 'I'm Mr. Drayton — Lorrimer Drayton. You've doubtless heard of my missing daughter. I engaged this lady as a detective to help find my daughter and to-night we were together up in The Silver Moon on the chance that we might there get a clue to my daughter's whereabouts. I should explain —'

'That all straight, lady?' the policeman interrupted.

'So far,' said Mary. 'But I don't understand —'

'Of course she'd say that!' broke in Mr. Drayton. 'You may know that I am a jeweler, my business being largely in diamonds. Like many other dealers in diamonds, it has become a fixed habit with me always to carry a few unset diamonds. I had some with me to-night: to be exact, twenty-one small stones of a total value of thirty thousand dollars. The diamonds were in a small brown leather wallet which had my name stamped on it. Two minutes ago this lady, who gave me her name as Miss Mary Regan, said she thought she saw my daughter enter the women's dressing-room and she sprang up and hurried away from me. Miss Regan did not come back. By accident I at once discovered that my diamonds were missing. I'd been with no one to-night except Miss Regan. I realized she alone could have taken them, and I hurried down here in time to cut off her escape.'

'What — what a lie!' exclaimed Mary. She had a fleeting wish that Clifford was beside her in this predicament which had enveloped her with such amazing unexpectedness. But Clifford would not be back from Chicago before the following morning.

'You want to make a complaint against this lady, Mr. Drayton?' inquired the officer with the respect due so rich and well-known a man.

'I certainly do, and I want her searched! Though, of course, she has had time to pass the diamonds on to a confederate.'

Mary's protests served her not at all. A second policeman had by now appeared, and she was crowded into a taxicab, together with Mr. Drayton. At the police station a matron searched her, and the search ended almost the moment it began. In Mary's handbag was the little brown jeweler's wallet of Mr. Drayton, and in that wallet were the twenty-one diamonds.

That night Mary spent in a cell.

CHAPTER XXX

CLIFFORD PLAYS A HUNCH

THE newspapers of the following morning made much of the theft and arrest. It was a sensational chapter in the sensational mystery of the disappearance of Marcia Drayton — 'Beautiful Woman Detective Robs Stricken Client' was the theme of most of the sensational stories of the newspapers.

As a part of this sensational story, Mary Regan's personal history for the first time became public. Mrs. Mary Regan Clifford, wife of the detective, so said the newspapers, was the daughter of 'Gentleman Jim' Regan, famous as a clever international swindler until his death a decade before, and was the niece of the almost equally famous confidence-man, Joseph Russell, now retired. She had been reared in the cynical philosophy of her family that what you can take successfully is yours. In the past Mary Regan had been suspected of having had a part in many big criminal operations, but until the previous night, when caught with the Drayton diamonds upon her person, she had always managed to avoid arrest.

It all made a lovely story — for the newspapers.

Clifford appeared just as Mary's case was being called in the Police Court. She was held for trial down in the dingy Criminal Courts Building, and was released upon heavy bail which Clifford had hurriedly secured. As they passed out of the court-room, they met Bradley, who apparently was interested in some other case in that morning's docket. The big detective,

one-time suitor of Mary, smiled mockingly at the two, and for a moment blocked their way.

'You people seem to have become tangled up in a lot of trouble,' he said, with exaggerated solicitude. 'If there is any way I can help you people out of this mess, please call on me — I always try to oblige and square up accounts.'

'If we get out of this, Bradley,' retorted Clifford, suddenly blazing at his old-time antagonist, 'it will be entirely through our own efforts — and not through any of your philanthropic endeavors!'

Outside, in a taxicab headed for his office, Clifford had his first chance at private speech with Mary. 'I suppose you know exactly what this game is?'

'Not the whole game. But my stealing of those diamonds was a frame-up. Mr. Drayton must have slipped them into my bag at The Silver Moon when I wasn't watching. Of course, he wasn't running any risk of losing the diamonds, since he had arranged for my immediate arrest.'

'Correct so far, Mary,' Clifford said. 'But why should Mr. Drayton do this to you?'

'I don't know. Mr. Drayton can have no grudge against me.'

'Again correct. But let your mind run back to our last meeting with Bradley — the thing we've talked so much about. Bradley then said that he was going to get you, and was going to smash me. Well — what Bradley then threatened is exactly what he's trying to have happen to you. I believe that it was only because you chanced to be in the office when Drayton came in that Bradley trapped you. I'm the person his trap was set for. Mr. Drayton is not the chief figure in this affair. Whatever the thing may look like, it is really another adroit plan of Bradley's, and Bradley is really the man we've got to fight.'

'Bob! I don't understand the whole thing at all!'

'Neither do I — not in all its details. But I'm now inclined to think that the mysterious disappearance of Miss Drayton is not as was represented to us or to the newspapers. Drayton was forced to act as he did against you. Don't you begin to glimpse what may be the real inside story?'

'You mean that in all phases of this affair Mr. Drayton has merely been somebody's tool?'

'Exactly. Merely obeying orders he did not dare disobey. Bradley's orders. Bradley has got something on Drayton. That's been Bradley's business this long while, to get the goods on some rich or influential person and then force that person to pay for silence or force that person to take his orders. Bradley's chief game at the immediate moment is to smash you — although I'll bet he is also somehow making Drayton pay over folly's gold.'

They talked of this until they were in Clifford's office. There Clifford, regarding across his desk the young wife who had been revealed to him in her true love and self-sacrifice for only these last few weeks, recognized the full magnitude of the situation which confronted them. Mary, through the newspapers, had been sensationally exploited to all the world as a thieving adventuress. And Mary, with her upbringing creating an impression of probable guilt of many undetected crimes, and charged with a theft of thirty thousand dollars by so respectable and influential a citizen as Lorrimer Drayton, would be sent to prison until she was a woman of middle years unless the suspected scheme could be uncovered. And Clifford's detective agency would become discredited and worthless. By Mary's situation, by her connection with the Drayton case, it would become known as a thieving,

hold-up organization, interested chiefly in securing its clients' money. All in all the situation was the most ruinous in its possibilities of any Clifford had ever faced.

'It means, Mary, that we shall have to fight harder than we've ever fought before,' Clifford concluded. 'We've both been fooled and made victims in this Drayton matter. There are two mysteries here, and to save ourselves we've got to solve both these mysteries. First mystery, what is the hold Bradley has over so rich and important a man as Drayton that he can force Drayton to be the accusing figure in a sensational frame-up? To find out that hold over Drayton is going to be my job. Second mystery, what is the real mystery of the strange disappearance of Marcia Drayton?'

'And that second mystery is going to be my job,' said Mary promptly — 'just as at the very start Mr. Drayton requested that it should be my job. But I'm not going to look where Mr. Drayton suggested, in the midnight haunts of New York's wildest set.'

'Good,' said Clifford. 'And I have a hunch, Mary, that together we'll put it over and that some party or parties, names unmentioned at present, will envy the gentle fall of the historic Mr. Humpty Dumpty.'

In the days that followed, Clifford saw nothing of Mary, who was working on her different theory in the search for Marcia Drayton. And he made no attempt to watch Bradley; there was nothing to be learned from Bradley's movements, for Bradley would make no important move inasmuch as his part had been already done. So Clifford quietly and unostentatiously concentrated upon the study of all possible elements and motives behind this unknown big thing which had resulted in smirching Mary's name and placing her freedom in jeopardy.

Clifford had many very good friends in various branches of the Government service, and after a week — during which the mystery of the disappearance of Marcia Drayton remained as sensational a mystery as before — he had acquired two apparently unrelated bits of shadowy information which seemed to him to have possible significance. The first of these was a whispered rumor that Mr. Drayton had succumbed to the lure of adding to his great fortune by the big profits to be made by secretly backing a large rum-running organization. There was no novelty in this rumor, for rumor was also current that big banks were also secretly financing similar large smuggling operations. The second important item was the confidential report that a quantity of unset diamonds, greatly exceeding the normal supply, was getting into the hands of dealers throughout the country, and that the source of this excess was a mystery to the customs officials.

After studying all his collected data, Clifford arrived at a tentative deduction so fantastic that he hardly dared put it into words even to himself, much less to his Government friends. But, wild as it was, it seemed to him the only working theory by which he might save Mary from the destruction which Bradley was holding over her. He reasoned that, if his conjectures were true, then Mr. Drayton would not be operating from his splendid Fifth Avenue shop, where all business was done in the open, but most likely from the privacy of the Drayton residence which no one would be very likely to suspect. Therefore, on this hypothesis, Clifford maneuvered two arrangements: first, Mr. Drayton's butler was called away by an urgent message and the butler engaged in his stead, upon highest recommendations, was one of Clifford's best operatives; and, second, Mr. Drayton's house telephone was deftly

tapped and three of Clifford's operatives took eight-hour turns in listening in.

The three days after Clifford had completed this arrangement were days of tense waiting for him. He heard nothing of consequence from his men, and nothing from Mary beyond daily reports of failure and how she could be quickly reached. As for himself, though he had adroitly watched Mr. Drayton, he still had nothing more than his theory: that is, except his discovery that Bradley was also keeping Mr. Drayton under skillful surveillance.

But on the afternoon of the fourth day one of the men assigned to listen in on Drayton's house telephone came in to see Clifford. The operative turned in a verbatim copy of an apparently inconsequential message which had just come over Drayton's wire. After his man had gone, Clifford intently searched for a secret that might be hidden in that seemingly casual message. Presently half a dozen widely separated words emerged and stood out with stark significance: Richard's Point — Monday night — twelve o'clock.

Richard's Point! He knew the place: far out on the North Shore of Long Island, a few lonely shacks of houses back from the waterside, a narrow rotting pier. Romoteness, deadness, isolation — an ideal spot! And Monday night was that very night!

At last Clifford saw that his theory was to be immediately tested by action.

Ten minutes later, Clifford had talked over the telephone with Special Agent Harford, of the Customs Service, and Special Agent Rafferty, of the Prohibition Service, both old friends, and both had promised to come at once to his office. Next he thought of Mary, then a hundred miles up the State. Presently he was talking to her.

'Mary, I have a lead on that matter — you know what,' he called to her. 'I think you'd better hurry right back to be ready for quick developments.'

'Glad to hear that,' sounded her far-off voice. 'But I've just got a lead, too, and I'm going to stay here and follow it up.'

'A lead on the missing person?' exclaimed Clifford.

'Yes.'

'For God's sake, what is it?'

'Nothing that it would be wise to talk about over the telephone. But you may hear from me sooner than you think.'

They talked further, but Mary told nothing more of her discoveries and plans. Clifford was still wondering what Mary had turned up, when Harford and Rafferty appeared.

'What's in the wind, Clifford?' asked Rafferty, of the Prohibition squad, the source of the rumor of Drayton's rum-running.

'I think that a cargo of hooch is to be landed tonight out on Long Island at Richard's Point.'

'Not in my line — that lets me out,' said Harford, of the Customs Service.

'Richard's Point!' exclaimed Rafferty in disgust. 'Don't you know the rum-runners have every local authority out that way on their pay-roll? I can't do any good unless you let me take out a gang of my own men.'

'A gang of your men might spoil everything. I want just you, Rafferty. And of course you, Harford. After all, Harford, the thing may not be so much out of your line.'

'What are you driving at, Clifford?' demanded Harford. 'Come through — let's have the inside dope.'

'I'd rather not, Harford.'

'Then count me out! I'm not craving to make a public boob of myself.'

'Same here,' said Rafferty.

'Listen, you two,' Clifford said earnestly. 'One reason I'm not telling you more is that I don't want you two boys to become public boobs. I'm playing a hunch. The hunch is so wild I hardly dare tell it even to myself. If the hunch should be right, there'll be credit in it for both of you. If the hunch is wrong, then there'll be no blame for you. You will merely have accepted my invitation to go on a motor ride. You will know nothing of my real purpose, so that will let you out if we run into public trouble. I'll be the goat. Come on, fellows — you won't refuse the invitation of an old friend to take an innocent little motor ride with him.'

'You slick son-of-a-gun!' grinned Harford. 'Of course we accept — eh, Rafferty?'

'Of course,' grinned Rafferty. 'And we won't know a single thing until Clifford tells us we ought to know it!'

CHAPTER XXXI

WINE THAT SPARKLES

At nine o'clock a limousine drew up before Mr. Drayton's Fifth Avenue residence. Presently Mr. Drayton came out and stepped into the big machine. As it moved away, two blocks behind it, where it had been waiting, a powerful closed car started up.

'Great Cæsar!' exclaimed Rafferty from the rear seat. 'Clifford, is Drayton the hunch you're playing?'

'Think what you please,' said Clifford from the wheel. 'Only keep remembering that you don't know a thing.'

'But, Lordy,' breathed Rafferty, 'if I could only nab one of these high-up respectables who are making fortunes out of financing the rum-running game! God, but I sure am sick of this job of pinching the little pocket-flask boys!'

'Just keep it in your heads,' reminded Clifford, 'that you are my guests, and that a well-bred guest doesn't attempt anything against his host's wishes.'

'Thanks for lesson Number Twenty-Three in Robert Clifford's book entitled "How a Young Girl Should Behave on a Joy Ride,"' Harford said dryly.

They lapsed into silence. Constantly Clifford was on the watch for the Drayton car to stop. He half-believed that there would be an instant's pause at some appointed spot and that Bradley would slip in and join the famous jeweler. But Queensborough Bridge was reached and passed and Bradley had not been picked up. As Clifford drove on, keeping the tail-

light of the Drayton car ever in view, he began to study anew and revise the possibilities of Bradley's part in all this affair that had publicly branded Mary as a thief and had made prison seem a certainty for her. If Bradley were not actually participating in this suspected business of to-night, then he had to be drawn into participation — somehow.

For over an hour the two cars rolled through the night over the famous Jericho Turnpike, keeping their respective positions. As they neared Smithtown, fifty miles out, Clifford had become certain of Mr. Drayton's proceedings for the next hour, and he decided upon a new course for himself. He put on speed until he was within fifty yards of the Drayton car. The Drayton car kept to the main highway which runs through Smithtown.

Just before the entrance to Smithtown, Clifford swung to the left into a country road which avoids the town and which is a short cut eliminating a mile from the curving turnpike. In a moment Clifford was flying through the deserted road at seventy miles an hour. A little later he swung to his left back into the turnpike. He knew that he had succeeded in his design: the Drayton car was now behind him and Mr. Drayton had not been made suspicious of having been passed. After that, whenever the roads permitted, Clifford went rocketing onward at close to the car's full speed.

Richard's Point is half a mile north of the highway, and is led down to by a rutted, ill-kept road. Toward midnight Clifford reached this little road, drove by it a hundred yards, turned his car around to head for the city, backed it into a wood where it was well hidden, and switched off all lights.

'You fellows follow me,' he said to Rafferty and Harford. 'Keep out of sight — see all you can, but

don't start anything — and be back here the second I am.'

With that Clifford slipped away, his soft hat pulled down and his overcoat collar turned up. Ten minutes later he was on the beach of Richard's Point and was dimly seeing and hearing just what he had expected to come upon: indeed, a common enough scene almost any night upon the hundreds of miles of shore line of Long Island. No lights were shown. Motor boats were softly put-putting, rowboats were gently scraping on the sand, shadowy figures were carrying oblong boxes up the beach and stacking them there or thrusting them into vaguely bulking motor trucks. There was no haste, no disorder; the unloading obviously had been well organized. And there were no indications of fear. There was no reason for fear when officials had been paid to remain ignorant, and in a region where the smuggling of liquor was looked upon as a minor offense, if not, indeed, a justifiable protest against a law regarded as unpopular and inequitable.

Clifford joined in the silent handling of the contraband. From the first he had noted a man who seemed to have full authority here, and yet who himself kept to one side close to two cases. Ten minutes passed — fifteen — then through the sandy beach ploughed a car which Clifford recognized as Mr. Drayton's limousine. Mr. Drayton stepped out, and instantly the man in authority approached him.

'That you, Carter?' Clifford heard Mr. Drayton whisper.

'Yes,' whispered the other. 'Here are the two cases.'

'Sure they are the right ones?'

'No chance of my losing them. They are the only cases of that kind in the cargo. Besides, I had them marked and kept them right under my eye all the way over.'

'Good. Let's get them into my car and be off. The trucks can take care of the other stuff.'

Clifford glided away, and once clear of the scene of concentrated activity, he hurried through the night toward his own car. Harford and Rafferty had obeyed his instructions. Puffing, they reached the car no more than half a minute after Clifford was at the wheel.

'What next, Clifford?' gasped Rafferty.

'Back to the city behind Mr. Drayton's car.'

'Why, Clifford, Drayton is taking only two cases!' protested Rafferty. 'Follow two measly cases when there are hundreds back on that beach, and when by calling for help I could make a whale of a haul!'

'You're a guest, Rafferty, and a guest obliges his host!' Clifford reminded him sharply.

Rafferty swore resignedly. Clifford nosed his car out of its hiding-place and waited near the head of the little road down to Richard's Point. Two or three minutes passed, then the Drayton limousine, its lights out, emerged from that road and swung cityward. Clifford, his own lights out, moved after it. A hundred yards ahead the lights of the Drayton car were switched on. The car was on the much-traveled highway now, and matter-of-factness was here the car's best protection against suspicion.

Clifford was content to keep well in the rear of the Drayton limousine, but never losing it; and in this manner the two cars returned to the city. From time to time, in dark stretches, Clifford glimpsed shadowy objects flying from an opened window of the limousine. He felt certain what they were; broken bits of boards that had once been the wooden boxes containing precious vintage or distillation.

Toward three o'clock the limousine drew up in front of the Drayton residence, and Drayton and Carter

stepped out, both carrying large suitcases which suggested men returning from a holiday in the country, and entered the big house. Two blocks away, Clifford snapped out to Rafferty:

'Quick, Rafferty, get to a public 'phone and get Bradley on the wire at his apartment. Mask your voice; I want Bradley to think the report is from one of his own men. Just say that Drayton has landed some stuff to-night and has just returned to his New York house. Then hang up quick before Bradley can ask questions, and come over to the house yourself. Give three soft raps and you'll get in.'

Rafferty was away on the instant. Clifford, eyes on the clock in the dashboard, waited two full minutes, then whispered, 'Come on, Harford,' and the two stepped out of the car and walked up to the Drayton door, upon which Clifford gently knocked three times. The door opened an inch.

'That you, Mr. Clifford?' asked the masquerading butler.

'Yes, Thompson.'

The door swung wide and the two slipped in. 'Where are Drayton and Carter?' Clifford asked in a whisper from the pseudo-butler.

'In the dining-room.'

'I thought they'd go there. You fixed the lock of the dining-room door as I told you?'

'Yes. They couldn't lock the door or even get a key into the lock. But that didn't bother them much. They didn't seem afraid of being disturbed — particularly since all the servants had gone to bed and they didn't even see me.'

'Good work, Thompson. Let Rafferty in when he shows up. Also let Bradley in. He may be along a little later. And signal us if there's any slip.'

'All right. But one moment, Mr. Clifford. Half an hour ago Mrs. Clifford called up here.'

'What!' In his surprise Clifford was barely able to keep his voice down to a whisper. 'Where is she?'

'At your home. She'd just got back to the city.'

'Did she tell you anything else?'

'That's all.'

'Then get her on the wire if you can — tell her I'm here — tell her I'm expecting something to happen here in about half an hour — and tell her to use her own judgment.'

As Clifford and Harford moved softly toward the dining-room, Clifford whispered fervently, 'I hope Bradley will get here in time to take his proper part in this deal! We'll have to watch for him and keep out of his way!'

At the closed door of the dining-room, Clifford went to one knee and applied an eye to the keyhole. His limited range of vision took in two great cut-glass punch-bowls upon the table, and the two men moving before them. He heard the 'plop' of a drawn cork, gurgling from a bottle, unintelligible whispers from the pair — then another 'plop,' more gurgling, again unintelligible whispers. He was now tingling with highest excitement. Harford, who could see nothing, gripped his arm in a silent demand for information, which Clifford dared not give. Clifford counted the 'plops' with the accuracy of a cash-register — he knew just how many there should be — and eagerly hoped for the appearance of Bradley. The 'plops' continued, the work within went on, but Bradley continued absent. Rafferty, however, was now beside them.

At the twenty-second 'plop,' Clifford dared wait no longer for Bradley. His pistol drawn, the two Government agents behind him, Clifford stepped quietly through the door.

'Hands up!' he snapped.

Drayton and Carter whirled about, their hands instinctively obeying the pistol's command. The great jeweler was for the first moment flaccid with surprise and fright. Then he tried to recall his accustomed dignity.

'What's the meaning of this,' he demanded, 'breaking into a man's house at this time of night?'

'It so happens that this entry is entirely legal,' said Clifford, quickly moving to a smaller bowl which he had seen and shifting it out of sight behind his back. 'Mr. Harford here, Government agent, has a search warrant' — which was pure bluff. 'Rafferty, Harford, take a look.'

The two Government men took a look. On the dining-table stood twenty-two empty champagne bottles, and two as yet unopened. Also on the table stood two large punchbowls, filled almost to their brims with wine that was still effervescent. The floor was strewn with the straw jackets of the bottles.

'What do you think of the layout, boys?' Clifford asked his friends.

'It's just champagne punch,' stammered Mr. Drayton 'We were just making a little champagne punch.'

'Twenty-four quarts of champagne for two men!' retorted Clifford ironically. 'And at three in the morning!'

'We — we were expecting a few friends in — a late party, you know —'

At that moment, as if in corroboration of Mr. Drayton, a heavy voice sounded at the front door. Clifford knew that voice. It belonged to the man he had been hoping this last half-hour would appear.

'Quick, boys, behind that screen!' he whispered, and instantly he and the two Government men were around

a high screen of mounted tapestries that sheltered with beauty the door of the butler's pantry.

Clifford kept one eye on the doorway of the dining-room. Almost at once in it appeared the powerful figure of Bradley. Bradley gazed menacingly at Drayton and Carter. Clifford's exultation went up another feverish dozen degrees: if Bradley would only commit himself!

'You sweet pair, you!' Bradley sneered at them. 'So you thought you could slip something over on me!'

'Mr. Bradley — please —' began Mr. Drayton.

'Shut up, Drayton! You tried to double-cross me in this deal, and you might have got away with it if one of my men hadn't just given me the tip.'

'Bradley —'

'Shut up!' Bradley again snapped at the jeweler. 'Brought over another load, this time so very carefully on the quiet that you thought you could beat me out of my split. But instead of just taking my usual split, this time I take it all! Get that, Drayton?'

'Bradley,' gasped out the frantic Mr. Drayton — 'Clifford's here!'

'Clifford!' ejaculated Bradley.

Clifford realized that no more was to be learned by the device of letting Bradley speak in ignorance. So he stepped out from behind the screen, pistol still in hand, the Government men behind him.

'You stick 'em up too, Bradley!' Clifford snapped at his old enemy. 'Behave — this is Government business.'

Bradley turned purple in his surprised rage, but his hands went slowly toward the ceiling.

'Search him, Rafferty,' Clifford continued, 'and go through the other two. Then we'll get down to business.'

Rafferty took an automatic off Bradley and another off Carter. Drayton was unarmed. The three were then permitted to lower their hands.

'I was just telling them, Mr. Bradley,' began Drayton in a wavering voice, 'that I was just preparing for a little late party —'

'Sure, and I was one of your guests,' said Bradley, picking up the cue, his marvelous poise now partially recovered. 'That's right. I guess I must be the first of your guests to come. I think I get the idea of this little situation. Rafferty thought some bootlegging was being done and that it was his official job to interfere.'

Bradley turned on Clifford with derision.

'I wouldn't expect anything wiser of a Prohibition Agent like Rafferty than to pull such a fool stunt, but I did think that you, Clifford, had more brains than to get in a mess like this. Bootlegging! What's a little bootlegging, even if you can prove it? Everybody's either buying or selling the stuff, and only hypocrites deny they're doing it. You can't possibly get a conviction in any New York court!'

Clifford did not heed him. 'Harford, will you please draw the cork of one of those two unopened champagne bottles.'

'Stop!' cried Mr. Drayton in sudden dismay.

'Go on,' ordered Clifford; and when the cork had come out with its smart 'plop' he continued to the customs man: 'Now pour the champagne into that punchbowl — pour very slowly, for I think there may be some dregs in that champagne and we don't want to mix the dregs with the good wine. Carefully — carefully — stop! Now pour the dregs of the bottle into this glass.'

With his left hand Clifford held out a champagne glass. Harford upended the bottle and the dregs

cascaded clinkingly into the glass. The dregs half-filled it, and gloriously threw off every brilliant hue of the rainbow.

'My God — diamonds!' ejaculated Harford.

'Just so — diamonds,' said Clifford. 'Here's certainly a new kind of sparkling wine. Now open that second champagne bottle.'

Harford obeyed. The dregs were another champagne glass half-filled with diamonds.

'You've got the direct evidence of how the trick was worked, Harford,' said Clifford. 'Now have a look at what was in the other twenty-two bottles.'

Clifford shoved forth a thing which until now he had kept out of view behind the punch bowl, a smaller bowl heaped with coruscating light.

'My God — diamonds!' ejaculated Harford again. 'A million dollars' worth of diamonds! A million — or two million — or more!'

CHAPTER XXXII

HAPPINESS AT LAST

CLIFFORD turned sharply on the famous jeweler, who had now drained to the gray color of some of his own precious platinum. Then Clifford turned on Bradley, whose aggressive, dusky face glowered back in dark defiance.

'Bootlegging, rum-running!' Clifford ironically snapped out, aiming his driving words chiefly at Drayton. 'Diamond smuggling! Drayton, you've utilized the lax ideas about smuggling liquor, and have smuggled in diamonds through the organized rum-smuggling machinery. The rum-running in itself has really been a very unimportant side-line with you. Just a clever blind, Drayton. No official, if fixed, would be likely to bother you over your contraband liquor.'

'Mr. Clifford,' said Mr. Drayton, weakly trying to summon back some portion of his dignity, 'are you trying to insult me by calling me a bootlegger?'

'I'm not trying to compliment you by calling you a bootlegger! There's no law in this country against the importation into this country of the kind of goods you deal in. But these two cases of contraband and non-dutiable champagne mean a theft, in the form of unpaid duty, of perhaps a half-million dollars from the Government. And that's not all you've stolen, Drayton. You've been playing this same game perhaps for years; many's the case of just such liquor you've smuggled in — all containing comparatively small diamonds such as these, one and two and three carats — easy to get rid of without exciting too much

suspicion. You've stolen millions from the Government! Harford, you see here the explanation of the unusual quantity of diamonds in the hands of the trade!'

'It's — it's —' spoke up Drayton in the manner of a gasping fish.

'Shut up — you're listening to me!' Clifford drove at him. 'I've told you exactly how you've worked your rum-smuggling and your diamond-smuggling — and I've caught you in the act and with the goods on. But that's not my job. That's the job of Rafferty and Harford. I'm after you, Drayton, for an entirely different matter: I'm after you for the way you've helped frame my wife, made her an object of scandalous notoriety, and have tried to head her for the penitentiary. And now I'm going to tell you the inside history of the trick you played on her, Mr. Drayton!

'Somehow Bradley here learned of your diamond-smuggling. Bradley made it part of the price of his silence that you involve my wife or me in most serious trouble. Bradley could not have chosen a better figure to be the instrument of his desire for revenge: the rich, the famous, the most respectable Mr. Lorrimer Drayton! So the trap was very adroitly prepared, and the diamonds were planted on my wife.'

'Drayton — not a word in reply!' Bradley cut in sharply.

Till then Clifford, exultant and furious, had been so concentrated upon his exposé and denunciation that he had had eyes only for Drayton and Bradley. Now, before he could go on, his vision chanced to take in the doorway. In it stood two women, the older with a protecting arm about the other.

'Mary!' exclaimed Clifford.

All the men whirled about. 'Marcia!' breathed Mr. Drayton.

'Fa—father,' whispered the pale-faced girl, who could not have been more than nineteen.

Mary stepped into the room. Her arm was still about the girl.

'I think it's my turn to say something,' Mary began. 'First, let me say that I have overheard most of the last that has been said. Second, let me say to you, Mr. Drayton' — her dark eyes blazed at the famous jeweler — 'that your daughter is not the incorrigible habitué of wild resorts that you told me she was. Marcia Drayton is one of the simplest, nicest girls I have ever met!'

Mr. Drayton gulped, but attempted no reply.

'Marcia has told me everything she knows,' Mary continued, now addressing all. 'Her father told her he was in very serious danger, and only she could help him. She could help him if she would secretly go away, and remain away a few weeks in a quiet place; when she returned there was to be, by way of explanation, a story of her having wandered off during a state of lost memory. The old story of amnesia which most people now accept. To save her father from his great, unexplained danger, Marcia consented. She was driven at night to the house of a former nurse who now has a little farm back in the Catskills. That's where I found her. While there Marcia never saw a newspaper, and she's wholly innocent in this business beyond a blind love for, and a blind desire to help, her father. There you have it all: the entire mystery of the mysterious and sensational disappearance of Marcia Drayton: a mystery case framed merely in order to get a chance to frame me.'

The great jeweler had slumped into a chair. Clifford gripped a shoulder of Drayton and shook the man wrathfully.

'How about it, Drayton?' he demanded.

'Marcia — didn't know a thing,' groaned Mr. Drayton into his hands. 'As for the rest, Mr. Clifford, you were right in what you said about my smuggling diamonds. I saw the chance of making millions by getting in diamonds free of duty as contraband liquor. And the rest is exactly as you told it — about Mr. Bradley finding out and forcing me —'

Clifford could not resist a triumphant interruption. He wheeled upon Bradley.

'I knew, Bradley, you would try just one too many of your smooth tricks!'

'It's a lie, what Drayton says about me!' Bradley exclaimed with harsh, throaty fury.

'So you say!' retorted Clifford. 'Go on, Mr. Drayton.'

'I was at Mr. Bradley's mercy. He threatened me with exposure — Federal prison. I was afraid for myself, and for the good name of Marcia. I've paid Bradley all kinds of money. Finally Bradley demanded that I do that thing against Mrs. Clifford. I didn't know her, so she was nobody to me. I was in such great trouble that I thought just of myself and Marcia. Every detail of the whole plan was Mr. Bradley's contriving. I'll —'

'It's all a lie!' repeated Bradley.

'I'll make restitution to the Government, and take the medicine the Government gives me,' continued the broken Mr. Drayton. 'And of course I'll withdraw my charges against Mrs. Clifford, and to-morrow I shall make public a sworn statement telling the whole truth of that matter — how Mr. Bradley drove me on and forced me to things that were forever worse. I'm through — through — and I'll swear to everything!'

'You'll keep my name out of any such sworn state-

ment or any other statement you make!' interrupted Bradley. 'Against me you can't prove a thing!'

'Proof!' cried Clifford in driving triumph. 'Proof? Why, in addition to Mr. Drayton, two Government agents and myself heard you condemn yourself out of your own mouth! We heard you tell Drayton you were not going to be satisfied with a split this time on those diamonds, but were going to take them all. You said you were going to steal a half-million or a million or more from the Government. The best proof in the world!'

Clifford moved a pace nearer Bradley.

'You are trapped in your own trap!' he cried. 'Your criminal career is ended. I've smashed you at last, Bradley — smashed you at last! For you it's a long, long time behind prison bars!'

Bradley glowered at Clifford with black, choking hatred. A sudden anger overwhelmed Clifford at what this clever, ruthless man had tried to do to Mary. It was the surging up of the primitive instinct of a man to avenge his woman — a physical vengeance personally secured.

'But before these Government men put the handcuffs on you, Bradley,' he gritted, pocketing his gun, 'I'm going to beat you up with my bare hands for the way you treated my wife. Keep out of this, everybody else!'

Bradley drew a hissing breath between his teeth.

'Thanks for the chance, Clifford. I could have hired you killed a hundred times over, but I didn't want you killed. But now, I warn you — if I can I'm going to kill you — damn your soul!'

For a moment they glared at each other, these two old-time enemies: Clifford with the avenging fury of a world that is won, Bradley with the crafty, convulsive fury of a world that is lost. They looked evenly

matched, and all in that splendid chamber, held back by Clifford's command, breathlessly awaited this climax of hatred.

Clifford drove a smashing right at Bradley's face which was skillfully blocked, and Bradley tried to reply with a fierce uppercut which was skillfully blocked. Then each man, in his rage, neglected all scientific defense. What followed was merely a repetition of the newspaper accounts of hundreds of heavyweight fights in which the enraged contestants have forgotten science and have laid themselves open to a crunching blow in order to land a crunching blow. In the midst of crashing furniture and glassware, with diamonds under foot, fists thudded home, breaths came gaspingly. There were no rounds. No time was kept. For all concerned the fight was epochal.

For five minutes this gigantic pummeling continued on even terms. Then came the unexpected. Bradley, through his many visits, knew the Drayton library as well as he knew his own splendid study out at Green Manors. From one of Clifford's blows he went staggering backward across the room, arms flung wide seemingly like those of a falling man, until his back struck the wall. Then his right hand shot out and snatched the pistol of the unsuspecting Rafferty and his left hand shot to the electric-light switch.

'I said I'd get you, Clifford!' he shouted.

There was a flash and a roar, and in the same instant the lights went out. Clifford slumped down in a heap, his lights also out.

When Clifford's lights came on again, he was in his own bed, and Mary sat beside him. He blinked at her, not remembering what had happened. Behind Mary hovered a nurse.

'Thank God!' Mary cried in a half-sob, bending down to clutch and kiss him. 'The doctors were right!'

'Right about what?' Clifford dazedly asked.

'That Bradley's bullet had caused only a concussion that a little time would remove.'

Then Clifford remembered the scene in the Drayton library.

'How long have I been like this?'

'Almost two days.'

'Two days! And Bradley — what about him?'

'He got away.'

'Got away! How?'

Briefly she told him. After his shot, Bradley had made a successful break through the darkness for his car which he had left with motor running, on its radiator cap a magical 'P.D.' plate. There had been pursuit, but it had been futile owing to Bradley's reckless speed and the police insignia which made every citizen and official give him right of way. He had made for his summer home at Green Manors, on Long Island Sound, and had immediately transferred to a big seaplane with which he had been toying for months, as an apparent amateur, and had vanished in the black night. The official belief was that for a long time Bradley had had his getaway in constant readiness for any mishap in his plans. His vast illicit gains he had been secretly transferring to some other country — France, it was believed — for only the heavily mortaged settings of his schemes remained behind. At this very hour he was probably in Mexico or one of the Central American republics, from where he could easily make his way to any European capitol of his desire.

'Then, after all my trying I didn't get Bradley!' Clifford groaned.

'But you did!' cried Mary. 'You did!'

'No, I did not! I really had him, and should have had Rafferty or Harford put the bracelets on him. But I was a fool! I let my temper get away from me because of what he'd tried to do to you, Mary, and I — oh, I was such a fool!'

She shut off his speech with a hand upon his mouth, and her dark eyes glowed down into his. 'That's why I love you — because again and again you have been that kind of a fool. You were a fool because of me. The public knows all the truth now, and it likes you all the better because you were a glorious fool — a fool for your wife's sake!'

'You're too good to me,' he mumbled through her fingers.

'No, I'm not. And you really did not fail with Bradley. You've had pages of praise in all the papers. I've saved them for you to read when you are better. And Mr. Drayton kept his promise, so I am entirely cleared. Remember, even if you did not put Bradley in jail, you exposed him and made him a fugitive from justice. He will never dare come back to his own country. Never! Don't you see?'

'I see.'

Even in that subliminal moment Clifford felt a pang of regret for the passing of Bradley. He had long fought Bradley as a criminal, but always with a secret admiration for the man's undoubted great powers, and always with a secret wonderment at what a force for good he might have been except for the crooked twist to his nature. And once upon a time, for all the hostilities of later years, the two had been the greatest of friends.

'And don't you see what it all means to us, dear?' Mary went on with quavering exuberance. 'Bradley is no longer a danger to you, or a danger to me! We

shan't any longer have to be playing parts — apparently against each other. We're safe! We can be together — without fear. That's the big thing to me! We can at last begin to live! Don't you understand?'

'Mary!' he breathed. 'Mary!'

He convulsively drew her closer to him and she sobbed upon his shoulder. He was thrilled with the rapture of the moment and of the future's promise. What, indeed, did it matter to them if he had not achieved the ultimate of his intention? He had Mary, and they were safe!

At last, after so long and bitter and involved a struggle, he and Mary each had the other while life lasted. And love and happiness stretched out infinitely . . . infinitely . . .

THE END

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